

THE LADY DRAGON OF DANCING POINT





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The Boys' Big Game Series

The
Lady Dragon of Dancing Point



“The Dragon’s Nest”—Chapter XXI

The Lady Dragon of Dancing Point

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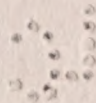
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The Lady Dragon of Dancing Point

CHAPTER I

NIGGER, THE OUTLAW, COMES TO GRIEF

Fashions in dogs change pretty much as they do in hats, cravats, shoes, trousers, the length and width of women's skirts and the kind of automobile one longs to have. Some of us old-timers can recall the successive reigns of the foxhound, the Spitz, the rat terrier, the greyhound, the poodle, the spaniel, the pug, the fox terrier, the Boston bull and the bristly Airedale.

This story, which harks back into the past of forty-two or more years ago, marks the era of the noble Newfoundland, who long held sway in

the hearts of all American children. The particular Newfoundland we are to know here, though black as night, was of a sunny disposition, and had no real enemies save the alley cats in the neighborhood where he frisked. Somewhat appropriately he had been named Nigger.

Nigger, it goes without saying, had a boy master. This master was fourteen years old and had name enough to kill him. In the family Bible record the boy was mentioned as Hamilton Bacon Willingham, which, according to the youth himself, was "sufficient to knock a Muscovy drake off his feet." Fortunately friends and relatives had trimmed the whole business down to "Ham." "It's hog meat all the way through—that name," said a witty boy, whose nose thereupon had promptly been punched by young Mister Willingham.

Like his dog, Ham, though altogether lovable, was constantly getting into scrapes. Things would go wrong even when the kid was trying to capture some of the chromos offered by the Presbyterian Sunday school.

To tell the truth, neither the boy nor the dog

dared to look a policeman in the face. Both were haunted by a perpetual sense of guilt. As a matter of fact, each in a way was a violator of the law. In a word, Nigger was unlicensed and wore no tag as did the pampered pups of better-regulated and more prosperous families. Every day the dog lived he cheated the city of Richmond, Virginia, out of a part of the dollar annually due the town as a tax on his existence.

There is little doubt that Nigger experienced a sense of shame each time he met a properly tagged tail-wagger, and it is equally certain that Ham felt twinges of uneasiness whenever the subject of tags, directly or indirectly, was brought up. The pity of it was that Ham, always a spendthrift, could never quite raise the dollar that would have bought a dog license and made his four-legged chum an honest-to-goodness citizen.

We get our first glimpse of Hamilton Bacon Willingham on a bright June morning at 7 o'clock in the year 1880, just after the public schools had closed, and thousands of happy pupils throughout the land had thrown aside as

many well-thumbed, dog-eared, pencil-scratched copies of McGuffey's highly moral series of school readers.

There was almost every reason for the boy to be happy, even though he was far too fat for his years and had to hear endless tiresome jokes about his chubbiness. But it was to be a troublesome day for him despite his sense of freedom, the radiance of the summer sunshine and the "scrumptious" waffles and maple syrup he had for breakfast.

Having gulped down his meal, all deaf to the protests of a good mother who invariably besought him not to bolt his food, Ham snatched up his cap and sauntered out into the open. Hardly had he reached the sidewalk ere he saw a sight that froze the very marrow in his bones.

Far down the street, followed by a throng of children, moved a barred, two-horse wagon, very shabby and rusty, but in shape and size almost the exact counterpart of the cage wagons used by circuses as "dens" for their wild beasts. Through the bars of this odd vehicle could be recognized the shapes of several animals, while

beside the team walked two men with huge nets fastened on poles.

“ Dog-catchers! ” gasped Ham, addressing nobody in particular. All too well he knew what the rolling prison portended. Like every other boy and girl in the city he had seen that wagon with its piteous freight before. Like every other youngster, too, he had been told that no unlicensed dog thrust behind its bars ever lived to tell the tale — that each and every pup captured was gassed the very day of its capture and forthwith turned into soap grease.

“ Ain’t it orful? ” wheezed a voice into the ear of Ham almost before the fat lad had sensed the approach of a fellow mortal. “ I say, ain’t it orful? They’ve done gone and scooped up yer good ole pup, Nigger, and they got that stub-tail yaller dog, Slops, that lived ’round the corner, too.”

The speaker was “ Snaggle-Tooth ” Perkins, a fascinating but not beautiful young American, who had crowded a heap of wicked activity into his short life of thirteen years and eleven months. Snag, as he was known for short, did everything

he oughtn't to do but usually shied at the performance of duties that might have made him respectable. Nevertheless, he was kind, loyal and courageous.

Most boys got whaled for associating with Snag, who lived "just two doors above" the Willinghams. But Ham was more fortunate. The Widow Willingham, who was a dressmaker and, though very poor, proud of her family connections, recognized much good in Snag. He did her countless favors.

On hearing the appalling news as to the fate of Nigger, Ham made no attempt to conceal the tears that were fast dimming his eyes. Under ordinary circumstances he would have died rather than weep before Snag, but somehow he now knew that his friend would sympathize with him and that no amount of blubbering would bring him into contempt.

"Snag, we gotta save that there dorg no matter what busts loose," sobbed Ham, "yes, even if I go to the penitentiary for it. Nigger ain't never harmed a flea, let alone a human being (here Ham entirely forgot about many perse-

cuted cats) and if they make soap grease outer him, it's gotta be over my dead body."

"Whatcher goin' do to stop 'em?" bluntly asked Snag, who had a practical mind. "Talk-in' is one thing and doin' another. If they find out he's your dorg, they'll send you to the penitentiary anyhow for not gittin' a license for him. Seems to me you'd better be layin' low."

"Well, I ain't goin' to lay low a minute, penitentiary or no penitentiary," wailed Ham, "and I'll die before I let a soul harm a hair on Nigger's body."

Snag thoughtfully spat through his front teeth — an accomplishment envied by every boy of his acquaintance — then brusquely replied, "Stand-in' here sniffing and chewin' the rag don't get us nowhere. We gotta be doin' sumptin'. Let's follow the wagon, anyhow; maybe some idea will pop into my coco."

So follow the wagon they did, though it was a wearisome, heartrending job which did not become more agreeable as the sun's heat increased. What hurt the most was the sight of Nigger there in the cage with all sorts of com-

mon curs and mongrels — yes, Nigger, the thoroughbred, with a pedigree almost as long as the family tree of the Widow Willingham was tall. Great was the snarling and snapping and growling and sniffing that went on among the restless captives, but the stately Newfoundland kept aloof from it all. Seated in a corner with a kingly dignity he made his presence felt and dared his vulgar associates to become familiar.

Only when the big animal sensed the approach of Ham and Snag did Nigger evince the slightest interest in things about him. Then he pounded the floor of the wagon with his bushy tail and stooped to lick a somewhat pudgy and decidedly dirty hand that had been shoved between the bars to caress him. It was his master's kindly hand.

“Break away from them there dorgs,” harshly cried one of the net bearers, and then, noting the heftiness of Ham, he added, “Git on home, you great big lummux.”

Now Ham could stand a great deal, but to be called a “lummux,” which in that day was a sort of slang word meaning a clumsy, awkward fool,

proved too much for his patience. Fighting mad and ready to tackle a buzz saw, he yelled back at the dog-catcher, "Dern your buttons —"

Just at this juncture and before any terrible word was uttered, Ham felt a restraining hand on his arm. It was Snag's and for once that young man was proving himself discreet. "Close yer flytrap and don't git sassy," he warned.

But Ham, still all ablaze with wrath, had to let off steam, so he contented himself by screaming, "Yes, I say dern your buttons, you go to the — the — er, the place where they don't shovel snow."

In times of danger Snag was all wisdom. Quicker than the telling of it, he yanked Ham away from the wagon and hid him among a bunch of sorrowful children, nearly every one of whom bewailed the fate of some humble dog behind the bars.

The two boys lapsed into silence and stuck closely to the sidewalk. All the forenoon, however, they plodded in the wake of the dog-catchers, watching every move of their enemies, nor did they direct their footsteps homeward until

the caged vehicle had disgorged its forlorn occupants in the city dog pound.

Ham was very sad. "It almost tore out my gizzard," he sighed, "when I seen 'em dump Nigger out with all them ragtag, bobtail curs. We gotta free him, Snag; we just *gotta* do it, I tell you."

Not once did it occur to either boy that one dollar, plus a fee and penalty of some fifty cents, would have solved all their difficulties. Or maybe their sporting blood was up by now and they preferred to defy the authorities like true desperadoes.

At any rate, both did some hard thinking. Snag, to relieve the mental tension, resorted to another infraction of the law as they neared home. From his pants pocket he drew a gravel-shooter, with which he amused himself by shooting at the English sparrows that came his way. Then quite suddenly he whirled around on his companion and said, "Ham, quit yer lookin' so solemn-choly. I got an idea in my coco. Nigger will be back with us before midnight."

"What idea?" queried Ham, doubtfully.

“ Can’t tell you now,” teasingly replied Snag. “ Never talk on an empty stomach. Ma’s goin’ to have sweet pertater pie for dinner and I gotta hurry. See you after feedin’ time. Betcha two horn agates and this gravel-shooter against your one-blade knife my silver duckwing game rooster can wallop that old Dominicker of yours in three minutes.”

With that the young sinner skinned over his back fence and disappeared in the yard of the Perkins homestead.

CHAPTER II

RESCUE WORK ON THE WHOLESALE PLAN

“It’s like eatin’ pie, it’s so easy; yessir, it’s so easy I almost hate to do it.”

The speaker was Snaggle-Tooth Perkins and his audience was Ham Willingham. In the friendly silence of a somewhat coquettish moon that constantly dodged behind velvety clouds, the two were making their way towards the north edge of the city. Need it be said that their destination was the dog pound? Both thrilled at the thought that they were about to enter upon an adventure which would make them heroes in the eyes of every boy in Richmond. Then, too, either lad would willingly have laid down his life for soft-eyed, cold-nosed, warm-hearted old Nigger, the king of cat-chasing Newfoundlands.

“Whatcher goin’ to do and how you goin’ to do it?” nervously inquired Ham. “I don’t know yet whatcher got up yer sleeve.”

“I got this up my sleeve,” replied the ingenious Snag, not realizing that his companion was speaking in figurative language; and forthwith from somewhere between his shoulder and his “funny bone” he drew out a keyhole saw. “And this, too,” he added, as he produced a small brace and bit.

“You may shoot me for a Dutchman, but I don’t catch on yet,” sighed Ham.

“Great day in the morning!” shrilly shrieked Snag, using a favorite Virginia expression of that period, “you sure are a numskull. Why, man, we’re going to saw Nigger out of the pound. With this brace and bit I’m to make an auger hole. In that hole I’m going to put the keyhole saw, and then, kid, me and you has got to do some fancy wrist work. Sawin’ hard pine wood looks like fun at first and then it gits to be misery.”

Five minutes later the two boys, with thumping hearts, paused on the brow of an ugly, suburban hill which was popularly known as the “city dump.” Behind them was a ramshackle negro quarter and not far distant the Richmond “po’-house.” A hundred yards in front, down a foul-

smelling slope which had been partly leveled, lay the dog pound, an enclosure fenced in by closely fitted seven-foot pine boards. Silence reigned about the canine prison — that is, silence so far as human noises were concerned. But ever and anon there came distressing wails and howls and growls and whines from the four-footed captives who were scheduled to meet the fate of outcasts.

“ This ain’t no time for you to be gittin’ cold feet or showin’ your hack feathers,” whispered Snag, by way of keeping up his own nerve.

“ ‘Cold feet nuthin’,” indignantly retorted Nigger’s master. “ I ain’t half as skeered as I am every day in grammar class at school. Let’s git at the job quick. They may commence makin’ soap grease out of them dorgs any minute.”

With that the two sturdy little spirits plunged boldly into a jungle of weeds and, despite many obstacles, rapidly made their way to the dog pound. Once at the fence they flattened themselves out on the ground and listened intently for signs of danger. At first not a sound could be heard. Then came a series of queer, sniffing

noises which were barely audible. These in no wise alarmed the young law-breakers, for peeping through a narrow slit between the planks, Ham and Snag saw the dark form of Nigger loom up. The leonine Newfoundland had been prompt to scent his friends and came immediately to that part of the fence on which they were to operate.

Had Nigger not obstructed the light with his great black bulk the boys also would have observed that every other pup in the pound had followed the example of the Newfoundland and hied himself to the spot opposite the place where the awful crime was about to be committed. There's a natural affinity between boys and dogs, anyhow, and it wasn't the least bit difficult for those poor, forlorn outlaws to smell their rescuers. Furthermore, Ham and Snag were "smelly" boys at best. Even a human being could have scented them on this hot June night.

To drill the auger hole and insert the keyhole saw therein was a work which required only five minutes of the valuable time of Mr. Snaggle-Tooth Perkins. Then the real labor began. To the accompaniment of fifty-nine friendly sniffings

—there were that many pups in the pound—Ham and Snag sawed and sawed and sawed. The board selected, though one of the narrowest in the fence, was eleven inches wide, and hard. It stubbornly resisted the teeth of the saw and drew blood from the hands of the two boys ere it finally yielded to their efforts.

“Jerusalem crickets! I’m glad the job is done,” sighed Ham, when the plank had been cut from side to side.

“But it ain’t done,” retorted Snag, “we gotta do the same thing at the bottom now and then bust the board in with a swift kick.”

So the drilling and sawing was repeated, to the further mutilation of both youngsters’ hands and at the cost of still more good red blood. Then when the section of wood to be removed hung on by a mere splinter Snag gave it the swift kick which he thought so necessary, and the fence gaped with an opening large enough to accommodate a lion. Ham and Snag had taken no chances as to its size.

What followed was not exactly according to programme. The boys, in their sympathy for

Nigger, had nearly forgotten about the other dogs. Somehow, they had overlooked the fact that a hole large enough to insure the escape of a Newfoundland could likewise serve as a medium of liberty for tail-waggers of lesser size. The result of this oversight was truly startling.

First of all to plunge through the aperture was Nigger, who gave a wild yelp of joy at getting in touch with his liberators, and then proceeded to lick their faces. This was only what might have been expected of a decent Newfoundland with a proper sense of gratitude. But the fun did not stop there. All the other fifty-eight dogs proceeded to crowd through the hole until the opening literally oozed curs and mongrels of every description. These animals likewise were thankful, and what was worse, they thought that *they*, too, were entitled to lick the faces of Ham and Snag.

“Holy smoke, what have we run into!” exclaimed Snag, kicking right and left, and vainly striving to beat off the dog kisses that were being lavished upon him. “The measly critters have begun to yelp, too, and in two minutes we’ll

have every policeman in town, let alone Detective Jack Wren, down on us. Ham, let's skedaddle."

As has been remarked before, Mr. Hamilton Bacon Willingham was fat and not usually given to over-exertion, but he needed no second invitation to run. With a crash he plunged through a cluster of pokeberry bushes and dashed down the hill with Nigger at his heels. A second later Snag, after having deliberately picked up his tools, followed suit.

The way of the fugitives led over uncertain ground. Both boys, in their fright, attempted to circle the city to the northeast and as a consequence they had to go uphill and downhill, through many gullies and ravines, and into seemingly endless acres of rank weeds growing among ash heaps and piles of tomato cans. Stones and bits of broken glass cut their feet, and in their flight they gathered dozens of brier burrs, or what in their more light-hearted moments they called "nigger lice." The going became increasingly difficult.

"I'm all blowed out and I gotta stop," panted Ham, after the run had continued fifteen minutes.

“My wind’s all gone and I got blood bruises all over my feet.”

But the pause was of pitifully short duration. After a minute’s halt the boys, despite their fatigue, had to run again. To their horror they realized that they were being pursued. Distinctly they could hear the rustle of vegetation in their wake and sense the patter of other feet in the paths they had traversed.

Just at this juncture the man in the moon must have been enjoying a hearty laugh at the sight of what was happening below him. The pursuers of Ham and Snag were not human beings but four-footed animals—a great majority of the dogs they had liberated.

What could have been more natural than the assumption of all these unfortunate curs and mongrels that they also, like the stately Nigger, were the chums of the two boys? So most of them decided that they would trail after the speeding pair and, if possible, give further demonstrations of gratitude and appreciation.

“Oh, Lordy, Oh, Lordy! the jig’s up,” wailed Snag when he realized what was happening.

"We gotta scoot like greased lightnin' and give them dogs the shake or every policeman in town will know what we have been up to."

But Ham and Snag, alas, were soon to discover that boys have nothing on dogs when it comes to rapid transit. The faster they sped the peppier and more indefatigable became their followers. At times the landscape seemed to seethe with pups. To make things worse, the dogs were beginning to bunch right at the heels of the fugitives.

More than once the bedraggled heroes paused to coax, beg, threaten and menace their self-appointed friends, but all in vain. Apparently all dogdom had joined the procession and each animal seemed determined to stick.

Just when the situation seemed most critical the quick wit of Snag saved the day, or rather brought about a change of programme. Looking ahead, he saw a long and seemingly interminable brick wall about five feet high. In an instant he recognized it as part of the fencing of one of the city cemeteries.

Graveyards aren't pleasant things at night,

especially in the opinion of boys already scared almost into "conniption fits," but this one proved a welcome sight to Snaggle-Tooth.

"Here's a buryin' ground," he whispered to Ham, "and if we-uns wanter keep from gittin' jugged we gotta skin over that wall and play dead among them graves a little while. Nigger'll have to poke along home the best way he can. Thank our lucky stars he can't jump this here wall, and if *he* can't you can bet your bottom dollar none them other curs can't."

"I can't jump it neither," whimpered Ham, almost on the verge of tears from weariness, and not at all liking the idea of "playing dead" among graves.

"'Fraid of a lot of graves and b'lieve in ghostes," bawled Snag. "Your ma ought to make you wear dresses and put yer hair up in curl papers."

Stung into action by this taunt, the fat boy leaped to the wall, wheezingly heaved his bulk to the top and was over on the other side almost before his astonished companion could realize what was happening.

With the agility of a monkey, Snag followed into the city of the dead.

Realizing that he had been left in the lurch, Nigger gave one pitiful whine and then philosophically decided to "poke along home." The other dogs, after sitting in solemn caucus a minute or so, voted to do the same, for they, too, had had a somewhat hectic day.

CHAPTER III

THE GRAVE GIVES UP ITS DEAD

“ We gotta proceed cautiously.”

These words fell from the lips of Ham when Snag thumped down beside him in the cemetery. Nigger's master was not altogether clear in his mind as to the exact meaning of “ proceeding cautiously.” But he had seen the expression in “ Old Ironsides, the Detective,” a fascinating ten-cent story, and it seemed appropriate to the occasion. Perhaps it was, too, for many strange things were about to happen.

To begin with, the graveyard looked uncomfortably dark except where an occasional moonbeam fell upon a granite shaft or where some marble angel spread out her wings in the dim light. Marble angels are not cheery creatures, at best, and those in a burying ground grow peculiarly spooky after sundown.

As if to make things less agreeable, stillness

reigned everywhere, for it was nearly midnight and the noises of the city had become hushed. Had it not been for the friendly fireflies, or "lightning bugs," as children call them, that flitted here and there over the grass-grown mounds, Ham and Snag would have been completely demoralized. As it was, each boy now realized he would vastly prefer an encounter with a policeman to a meeting with a ghost.

"Got goose bumps poppin' out all over me," whispered Snag, and then by way of apology he added, "Running from them plague-take-it dorgs het me all up and now I'm sorter chilly."

"Me, too," quoth Ham, glad to have a companion in misery.

Proceeding as rapidly as they could in a westerly direction, the boys sought to make a short cut for home. Some 200 yards from their starting point, in a particularly lonesome section of the cemetery, Ham paused and tugged at the sleeve of Snag. "My soul!" he exclaimed, pointing to an unexpected illumination some fifteen yards ahead, "but ain't that a whoppin' big lightnin' bug?"

Snag also had seen the light. He strove hard not to let his companion know that his teeth were chattering when he replied, "Lightnin' bug, shucks! That's a sure-enough light—a dark lantern, I do believe—and somebody else besides us is in this graveyard tonight. Maybe it's a policeman. What had we better do?"

"Stand fast and not try to leg it," answered Ham. "Might trip over a baby's tombstone or stump our toes on a grave. Whoever it is ain't seen us, anyhow."

Jefferson Davis Perkins—that was Snag's name in polite society—was also of the opinion that safety did not lie in flight. So the two boys stood their ground, or, what was braver still, crept up a little nearer. What they saw did not make them feel a bit cheerful.

By now the light had been shifted so as to reveal four human forms. One the boys recognized as that of a notorious negro hackman who had figured in a murder case. The faces of the three other men—evidently whites—were masked with handkerchiefs. All kept their eyes on the ground yet seemed to be nervously alert.

The negro, plainly the hireling of his associates, bore a shovel in his hand.

“They’re goin’ to have a burial,” whispered Ham. “Guess it must be some poor rooster who’s kicked the bucket from smallpox or seven years itch or some other outrageous disease.” (Ham really meant “contagious” disease, but at that period of his life he was rather weak with big words.)

“Bury nothin’,” retorted Snag. “Looks to me like they’re goin’ to dig somebody up. Can’t you see they’re leanin’ over a new made grave mound and have laid aside a lot of flowers?”

“Let’s be goin’,” uneasily suggested the fat youngster. “’Tain’t respectful to be hangin’ around a burial when you don’t know the corpse.”

“Go no - o - o wh-wh-wh-wh-ere — nowhere, skeeredcat,” stubbornly stuttered Snag, while his teeth rattled like seed in a gourd and at heart he wished he were a thousand miles away. He hoped that Ham would insist on a prompt departure.

To the deep regret of Mr. Perkins, Ham did not insist on a retreat. Thus it came to pass

that the two boys saw a sight which was to haunt them for weeks to come.

Snag had correctly sized up the situation. The men were about to take a body from the grave, and their actions showed that they wanted to do this in the quickest way possible. Their scheme was to economize labor by digging up only half of the grave — the half covering that part of the casket lid which separated the head and shoulders of the dead from the clod above. Once this section of the lid were lifted, the body could easily be dragged out of its resting place.

“It sure is a curious sort of business,” buzzed Ham into the ear of Perkins. “Somehow I don’t like it — no, not even watchin’ it. Seems to me when you plant a codger you oughta let him be and not keep pokin’ at him.”

To this remark Snag made no reply. His curiosity had got the better of his fears. He was too fascinated either to move or to answer. But both he and his friend were to see far more than they wished.

The earth was rapidly thrown out half of the grave. Then down into the black hole swung the

negro until only his egg-shaped skull appeared above ground. Next it disappeared altogether. Five minutes later it reappeared. By the side of it was a second head — a very rigid head.

Then the dark lantern flashed earthward, and for a few seconds the boys beheld a spectacle that sent cold chills dancing down their spines. In the light they saw the black, leering, apelike face of the negro and the pallid, waxy face of a dead man.

“I can’t stand no more of it; I’ve got the billywiggles,” wailed Ham. “I’m goin’ to make tracks for home.”

“The same here,” admitted the once-brave Snag. “I got a plenty. I wisht to goodness I’d a scooted when you first got the fidgets.”

With that both youngsters, without further ado, took to their heels and made a frantic dash towards the western walls of the cemetery.

If there was any lack of speed on their part, it was not manifest three minutes later when five pistol shots were heard in quick succession.

“They’re after us,” panted Ham, “and we’ll never get out of here alive.”

Somewhere near 1 o'clock in the morning Ham and Snag reached their homes in almost the last stages of exhaustion. Nigger, long since forgotten, had preceded them by an hour or more, and so had the stub-tail yaller dog, Slops.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT THE NEWSPAPER SAID NEXT DAY

On the morning following the incident in the cemetery, Jefferson Davis Perkins appeared in the alley back of the Willingham home. Placing his mouth at a knot hole in the fence, he emitted this somewhat shocking question: "Wanter go to Hell, Ham?"

"Naw, don't wanter go to Hell and don't wanter go to Heaven, neither," replied the fat person to whom the query was addressed. Here it should be explained in justice to both boys that neither was given to profanity. "Hell" and "Heaven," as well as "Little Soda," "Big Soda" and "Head the Island," were the names of famous swimming holes in the James river.

Ham and Snag were perfectly at home in the water and it was difficult to say which was the better swimmer. As a diver the leaner lad had no equal, while Ham was an absolutely non-

sinkable proposition in any current. But this was not to be their day for swimming.

On being informed as to his friend's disinclination to "taking to water," Snag proceeded to climb the fence and bounce into Ham's back yard. He might easily have come through the gate, but he preferred the more strenuous method of approach.

"What makes you so grumpy?" questioned Snag. "Still skeerd over what happened last night? Reckon you think the police are goin' to raise a big rumpus 'bout them dorgs we let loose."

"I ain't skeered a-tall but I'm worried—awful worried—and you'll be gittin' squirmy, too, when I tell you what's the matter. This morning the first thing I did when I got up was to find *The Daily Dispatch* and look to see if they said anything about Nigger and us."

"Did they?" eagerly asked Snag.

"No, not a word, but there's a terrible lot about a grave robbery in the cemetery where we were last night. The paper says ghouls—whatever they are—have been at work in several

Richmond buryin'-grounds recently and that they've stolen dozens of bodies."

"What do they do with 'em?" demanded Jefferson Davis Perkins. "Seems to me a dead person would be the last thing I'd want. Don't you remember how I kicked against your digging up that pet rabbit you'd buried?"

Ham ignored the reference to his departed bunny and said, "Grave robbers steal corpses to sell to medical colleges where students cut up the bodies. They get good money for 'em, too."

"Gee, I'm glad I'm not a student," shudderingly replied Snag, and then he added somewhat anxiously, "Does the paper say who was in the buryin'-ground last night; that is, does it — er — say that me and you was there?"

"No, it puts it this way," said Ham, reading from a paragraph before him: "Policeman Barney Wilkinson, who interrupted the ghouls while they were at their grewsome work, does not know the identity of the guilty parties. They fled at his approach, leaving the corpse by the open grave, and the five shots he sent after them failed to halt their flight. Officer Wilkinson is

certain, however, that he saw four retreating figures.

“Policeman Dennis Hannigan, who was on a beat near the western wall of the cemetery, reports that shortly after the shooting, he noticed two small white boys running down Second Street at breakneck speed. It was a late hour for boys to be away from home, but it is hardly to be supposed that these youngsters had any connection with the grave robbery.”

“Jumpin’ crickets! that was us Officer Hannigan saw,” gasped Snag. “My! but it was a close call. Still, a miss is as good as a mile. So long as we keep quiet we’ll be all hunkadorey.”

“Not so sure about that,” grimly said Ham. “I ain’t told you all. The worst is yet to come. Not far from the grave the police found a keyhole saw and a brace and bit, as well as a bloody handkerchief. The newspaper says, ‘It is confidently believed that the keyhole saw will prove a valuable clew. On its wooden handle crudely scratched are the initials J. D. H. The handkerchief, though much soiled and in some places soaked in blood, bears the letters ‘HAM.’”

"Oh Lawdy, our goose is cooked!" moaned Snag, in terrible distress. "Like a plum fool I dropped my tools when we started to run just as they were dragging that awful thing out of the grave. Detective Jack Wren will get us sure. Even now he may be on our trail."

"And the handkerchief was mine," sobbed Ham. "I put my name on it with indelible ink one day when Ma was marking some sheets and towels. The blood came from brier scratches."

"Can't we explain if they catch us?" faintly suggested Snag without a flicker of hope in his breast.

"Explain nuthin'; the more we talk the worse it will be. If we tell how we got in the graveyard we'll have to explain how we rescued Nigger, and then there'll be the very Harry Old Scratch. It'll mean a thousand years in the penitentiary for us, or what's more likely — hangin'."

"Maybe they'll let us off because we are boys, and just punish the men. Don't nobody expect a boy to be good, nohow, and after all, we didn't mean no harm when we helped Nigger."

"But they don't know who the men are,"

wailed Ham, "and besides, nobody would believe two boys that let a whole parcel of cur dogs loose on the town."

"I know who one of the men was, Ham, and so do you. He was that black hack driver they call Sam Simpson. Drat him, he's the fellow that helped the dog-catchers land that poor li'l lame black and white dog they caught down on Fifth Street."

"So he was, so he was and no mistake," exclaimed Ham. "I believe I could recognize one of the other fellows, too—that short, bow-legged man with broad shoulders. Did you notice that the little finger was gone off his right hand and that on his watch chain he wore a charm that looked like a lion's tooth?"

"I sure did!" exclaimed Snag, "and I also noticed that his ears stuck out from his head like a coon's, though he kept puttin' his handkerchief back over 'em when it slipped. Golly Moses, man, I got another idea. Why can't we play detective and go tell the police all we know? Maybe we could get our name in the paper that way."

"Us play detective when we let loose them

dogs and got the penitentiary hangin' over us!" sneered Ham. "Why, kid, you're full of mice. And besides, the newspaper says, 'Every person who had any connection, directly or indirectly, with this dastardly crime will be punished to the fullest extent of the law.' That's hittin' at us; I do believe the editor knows we were there."

"Looks mighty that way to me, too," sadly admitted Jefferson Davis Perkins. Then, quick as a flash, the whole expression of his face changed and his eyes sparkled. The boy had developed another "idea." Tiptoeing up to his fat friend he whispered in the somewhat soiled ear of that young citizen, "Ham, our only safety is in flight. We gotta be fugitives from justice. This town is gittin' too hot for us."

Before a reply to this thrilling proposition could be framed, a voice came from the kitchen crying, "Ham. HAM! Hamilton!! Hamilton Bacon Willingham!!! You come here this minute and stop piddling around there in the back yard. I've got work for you to do."

It was Mrs. Willingham, about the only per-

son on earth who would have had the energy to pronounce Ham's name in full. The tone of her voice seemed to carry a threat, but her son knew better. It had been a long, long time since he had received a whaling and some sixth sense now told him that he wasn't to be chastised that morning.

NOTE

Dr. W. Asbury Christian's notable history, "Richmond: Her Past and Present," has this to say about the grave robberies in the Virginia capital:

"Scarcely a year passed that Richmond did not have some great sensation that kept minds active and tongues busy. This year (1880) opened with a serious one that affected the whole city, but especially those who had friends and loved ones buried in Oakwood Cemetery. The startling announcement was made that the ghouls were at work and that already forty graves had been robbed.

"Most of the graves opened were in the eastern section where the poorer people were buried, but their bodies were as dear to their friends and relatives as any other class.

"It became known that many of the bodies were shipped in coal-oil barrels and some found their way into the dissecting room of the Medical College here. There was great excitement and some people were even afraid to die for fear the body-snatchers would get them; at least they desired to postpone it until the business was broken up.

“The Council Committee on Cemeteries began an immediate investigation, then the Council took it up and deposed the superintendent of the cemetery, and later the grand jury began to probe into the matter. No one was convicted, but the grave robbers had to transfer their business from Richmond to another place, for awhile at least, to allow the people to die in peace.”

CHAPTER V

HAM HEARS ABOUT A DRAGON

It becomes necessary at this point to describe Hamilton Bacon Willingham more in detail. To do this will be to reveal certain facts which in 1880 were a sore trial to him. In the first place, the boy was downright handsome, or what, to his unutterable disgust, the women called "cute." He had the reddest of round cheeks that *would* dimple in spite of everything he could do, and the softest of brown eyes. An added source of shame to him was his chestnut hair that curled even after the most persistent brushings. As for his even white teeth, they were a constant proof that toothbrushes are not absolutely necessary to the dental equipment of all youngsters. Ham, it is true, was the possessor of several toothbrushes but they had many and long vacations.

In view of the foregoing description nobody should be astonished to learn that the Widow

Willingham, after having called her son in from the back yard and seated him in a parlor chair, impulsively threw her arms around his neck and cried, "Oh, my darling, pretty little boy, you don't know how much trouble you are giving me."

Ham, at this period of his life, hated to be hugged, loathed to be addressed as a darling, and, as has been intimated, despised to be called pretty. It would have broken his heart had Snaggle-Tooth Perkins peeped in on the scene just then or heard him spoken of as "little." Nevertheless, Ham submitted quietly to the caresses, for his instinct told him that the hour had come for the use of his wits. Furthermore, he loved his mother devotedly and at that moment, for the first time, he realized that Mrs. Willingham, despite her shabbiness, her careworn expression and her thirty-five years, was unmistakably comely.

Lying was not among the boy's accomplishments, and what is more, he had reached the age when he found a certain amount of sport in facing issues. So he said, "Well, I reckon you're

goin' to jump me for being out so late last night, ain't you, Ma? There ain't no two ways about it—I do deserve a tannin' though I'm kinder wonderin' how you could handle me if you really did take it into your head to give me a wallop. I ain't nobody's dwarf, you know."

Now all this was Ham's shrewd way of saying that though he knew he deserved a whipping, he entertained strong hopes of avoiding the issue by suave strategy.

Mrs. Willingham was astute enough to see through the scheme. She adopted another line of punishment. She kissed Ham resoundingly on the forehead—loud enough for Snag Perkins and all the other boys on the block to hear—and then she said, "Oh, precious, what monstrous grammar you use—the po'-whitest I ever heard. And my what mangy hands and dirty ears and smeary cheeks you have. But before you wash up I wish to know what you were doing last night."

This brought forth the story in installments—or most of it. Ham forgot, however, to describe the grave-robbers, as he recalled them, and omit-

ted to say that he and Snag were contemplating flight.

The more Mrs. Willingham heard, the more she gasped. She herself was an ally of Nigger and would gladly have paid his license had her attention previously been directed to the matter. In her inexperience she did not know what view the authorities would take of the wholesale rescue, nor was she exactly certain whether or not the boys would really be suspected of a part in the grave robbery.

On one point, however, her mind was made up. Come what might, she did not intend to allow Ham to figure in any case before the police justice or before any court of law. He was too young for that.

After thinking over the matter a few minutes she said, "I know what I'll do with you, you darling little nuisance. I'm going to send you out of town, and meanwhile I'll consult a lawyer."

Ham's heart sank within him. He felt a sense of infinite disgust and humiliation. To be rescued thus by one's mother — how babyish it was!

What he wanted to do was to “seek safety in flight”—to be a fugitive from justice with good old Snag and Nigger as his companions. No police or detectives could beat that combination if they “proceeded with caution.”

“Where are you going to send me?” moodily asked Ham.

“Down in Charles City county about thirty miles below here on the James river, where all your kinfolks live.” Then, as an afterthought, the widow added with a touch of pride, “They’re people to be proud of—your Charles City connections.”

“Then why are you a dressmaker, if we’ve got so many fine relatives?” blurted out Ham, who regretted the question the instant he asked it.

The widow flinched as though cut with a whip when she heard the words, but was quick as a flash to regain her self-command. “Never mind about that, my darling,” she replied, “you’re not old enough to understand such things yet.”

“But I’d like to understand if I could help you,” said the boy, and then somehow he wasn’t at all ashamed that now she was hugging him

tight and that he in turn was patting her cheek.

“Don’t you worry about not having a good time in Charles City, Ham,” said his mother, trying to change the subject. “It isn’t a city at all, you know—just plain country—but there’s room enough there even for a restless boy like you. If you want you can also take Nigger. He’ll be safe enough down there unless some other dog chews him up.”

“Humph, I’d like to see some other dorg try it—that I would,” retorted Ham indignantly. “He can eat up anything his size that walks on four legs.”

“Well, anyhow, he’d better look out for the Charles City dragon,” replied the widow smilingly.

“What,” almost screamed the boy. “Did you say DRAGON? I thought there wasn’t any dragons except in fairy tales.”

“I thought so, too, but for the last three weeks every letter I’ve received from Charles City speaks of some fearful monster that’s terrifying the negroes down there. The thing is even mentioned in the papers now and everybody speaks

of it as the 'dragon.' It seems to hang around creeks and ponds, and is known to have maimed several cows, besides partially eating two calves."

"Oh, Ma, does it spit fire and smell of brimstone, and do you reckon that if me and Nigger killed it we could rescue some lovely princess and marry her — that is, I could marry her and Nigger could be her faithful vassal. Of course, I understand that Nigger couldn't marry her."

"I don't particularly care to have you go into the dragon-killing business just yet, my boy, and like every other woman, I'm opposed to having a daughter-in-law, even though she be a princess. Nevertheless, I'll let you go to Charles City provided you promise to do nothing imprudent."

"I'll promise anything, Ma, indeed I will. Yes, I'll clean my teeth after every meal and the way I'll wash my neck will almost rub the skin off it."

"All right; anything except a daughter-in-law."

But even as Mrs. Willingham spoke, she saw the expression of her son's face change so mark-

edly that she was not in the least surprised when she heard him saying, "Since I come to think about it, Ma, I don't believe I want'er go. I'd like to get a whack at that dragon but sumthin' tells me I oughta stick here."

"Why, what's got into you all of a sudden, Ham? A minute ago I couldn't hold you back."

"Well, if you won't laugh at me I'll tell you. It's Snag Perkins. He's in grave danger (this expression was borrowed from a penny dreadful) and I shan't desert him. Snag's my partner and he stuck by me like a sheepburr when the dog-catchers scooped up Nigger. 'Twas him that had the idea about the rescue, too, and if he hadn't been in the cemetery with me last night I do believe I'd a had spasms. Can't nuthin' skeer him. Snag ain't pretty to look at but he's a brick."

"The world isn't overburdened with loyalty and gratitude," sighed Mrs. Willingham, as though talking to somebody far away. "When we see these virtues we ought to encourage them. My darling, Snag may go with you if his mother will allow it."

“Glory hallelujah!” whooped Ham.

“But if you two boys rescue a princess from the dragon, you must let Snag do the marrying. There isn’t any girl on earth good enough for you.”

CHAPTER VI

THE "RESURRECTIONIST" WHO WOULDN'T FIGHT

Overhead a summer sky of blue; below the sparkling waters of the James; on the right the smiling lowlands of Chesterfield; on the left the vine-fringed bluffs of Henrico; to the west the receding outlines of Richmond on her seven hills; to the east the winding path of the silvery river that never seemed quite certain as to the way it would go.

Ham and Snag were off for Charles City county. It was the steamer Ariel that bore them. Each boy had been duly scrubbed, counseled, kissed and inserted into his Sunday clothes under maternal supervision. Each also had been warned against doing a thousand things that boys always do, and urged to observe a thousand rules that boys always fail to observe.

The two youngsters were heavily freighted when they wedged in among the crowds that

passed over the gangplank. In addition to an ancient carpetbag containing the wardrobe of Ham, that youngster carried a good-sized shoe box bulging with lunch. Around the lad's right wrist was wrapped a rope and to that rope was attached the dearly-beloved form of Nigger, wildly excited but altogether satisfied. Any question as to the temper of the amiable animal would have been answered by a glance at his bushy tail which he waved back and forth like a bandmaster wielding a baton.

Jefferson Davis Perkins likewise had seen to it that he did not lack for lunch. The receptacle containing his food supply was even larger than Ham's. His clothing, of which he had no overplus, had been jammed into a venerable valise, and in each pocket of his Sabbath knickerbockers nestled a gravel-shooter. Nor did his baggage, or "impedimenta," as Julius Caesar would have called it, end with this outfit. At great inconvenience, he also bore a huge pasteboard bandbox such as women use for their millinery.

Obviously this carton did not contain feminine headgear, for it was full of round holes, each

about the size of a quarter, and was much bedraggled from contact with Snag's hands. The use of the box was startlingly demonstrated when from its inside there issued the clarion voice of a gamecock. Snag was taking his silver duckwing rooster to the country with him.

This valiant bird, named Billy Mahone in honor of a famous ex-Confederate general then figuring prominently in Virginia politics, was the darling of Snag's heart. A hundred victories had come to Billy Mahone from as many backyard cockfights instigated by his master, but the fowl was allowed to "knock" only with his natural spurs. His owner would have died rather than let the rooster go into the pit with steel spurs.

Just as the Ariel steamed by Warwick, a point about four miles below Richmond, to which tradition says the poet Edgar Allan Poe often swam, Jefferson Davis Perkins remarked to his companion, "Ham, it's about time we was eatin' our snack, ain't it?"

Although the boys had had their breakfast only two hours before, Ham was only too willing to

accede to Snag's proposition looking to further nourishment. So also was Nigger, who readily smelled out the meaning of the question.

Opening up the battle with an attack on a sweet potato pie and rapidly working their way backward on the bill of fare to fried chicken legs and cucumber pickles, Ham and Snag proceeded to enjoy life and exchange confidences.

No youngster, however, is ever willing to admit that he is wholly and completely happy, and Ham, assuredly, was not an exception to this rule. So just when the grub was tasting best, he knitted his eyebrows, tried to look serious, and said, "Snag, I feel that our very footsteps are being dogged."

"Maybe they are," replied Snag, now busily engaged on a chicken leg, "but I ain't lettin' that bother me. All I know is that our footsteps sure was dogged last Tuesday night (the time of Nigger's rescue) when we let loose all them curs and scalawag mongrels from the city dog pound. They haven't followed us aboard this ship, have they? "

Ham couldn't exactly explain who was pursu-

ing him, so he changed the subject. The lunches consumed, both boys proceeded to investigate things about them as only boys can do. It was to be nearly two hours before the slow boat reached the landing at Wilson's wharf, their point of destination.

First they amused themselves studying the drowsy landscape on each side of the river. Then they began watching the aquatic birds that flew up along the shores from time to time — the big, spindle-shanked blue herons, popularly known as cranes, the ungainly Indian hens called "fiddle-doo" birds by Old Dominion boys, the summer ducks, the sand snipes, the plovers, the kildees, the kingfishers, the fish hawks and the bank swallows.

Snag, having no ammunition for his gravel-shooters, soon tired of the birds and proposed a climb to the hurricane deck. This in turn was followed by an excursion to the lower compartments of the steamer where the engine rooms were located and the freights were stored.

Just when it looked as if they had inspected and fingered about everything that was inspect-

able or fingerable, the two youngsters unexpectedly ran into the one place where their mothers would most have wished them not to be—the tiny bar-room of the Ariel.

Neither ever had been in a saloon, big or little, before. Each therefore had an impulse to sidestep, yet something held both of them charmed. The strange, smoke-ridden atmosphere, with its smells of tobacco, mint, whiskey and wine, fascinated them and they stood stock still.

Nobody noticed the appearance of Ham and Snag. Attention was focused on two flashily dressed men who evidently had drunk too much. They had begun to quarrel and were growing imprudent in speech. Much that they said was not fit for the ears of boys, and a good deal fortunately was beyond their understanding.

Ham and Snag could not fail to comprehend, however, when the smaller of the two men said to the person who had incurred his displeasure, “You do a heap of talking about being a dead-game sport, and you think you can throw a lot of drinks into my hide and keep me quiet, but I say you are a dirty dog.”

Usually such language as that, when uttered in Virginia, is followed by fisticuffs, and the boys waited in breathless excitement for the sequel. But the man at whom the insult was directed, though furious, did not fight. Intoxicated though he was, he held himself in check.

Spurred on by this silence and inaction, the smaller man continued, "Yes, I repeat it—you're a dirty dog. I can swallow a lot and love a dollar as well as the next one, but I don't like to see any man putting the thumbscrews on a woman—especially a woman with no one to protect her."

At this the larger man made a quick movement as though about to maul his tormentor. The situation now had grown so tense that the barkeeper, a husky individual not to be trifled with, saw fit to intervene in the cause of peace. He threatened to have both offenders put ashore unless they ceased their quarreling and became more orderly.

Under this pressure quiet was restored, and the two who had caused the disturbance withdrew to different parts of the boat. As the

smaller man shuffled off, the boys heard him continually repeating to himself in a maudlin way such expressions as these, "The dirty dog," "the sneaking resurrectionist," "the cowardly thief." "He robs the living and he even goes after the dead." "I'll make him squeal some day when I tell about those papers."

"What's a 'resurrectionist'?" queried Snag when he and Ham were alone again.

"Sounds to me like somebody in the Bible," answered the fat boy, not willing to be stumped by any question his companion might ask. "It's a man who does something or other when Gabriel blows his trumpet on judgment day and the dead rise up."

"Wouldn't want the job," briefly said Snag, recalling his experience in the cemetery.

Somehow this remark sharpened the memory of his companion. "Oh, I remember now," exclaimed Ham. "I know what a 'resurrectionist' is. I saw the word in the newspaper. It's a grave-robber. Je-ru-sa-lem crickets! Snag, that man that let the little fellow give him so much lip is a body-snatcher."

“Yes, and he’s the very one we saw in the graveyard,” replied the owner of the silver duck-wing gamecock. “Since I come to think about it, I recognize his bow legs and the ears that stick way out — ”

“And the lion’s tooth on his watch chain,” interrupted Ham. “My sakes alive, we’re better than detectives. What ought we to do about it? ”

“Do nuthin’. He might recognize *us*, too, and lay the whole business on me and you. Who knows? He may be doggin’ our footsteps.”

Half an hour later the two boys, seemingly as unconcerned as though they never had a worry in their lives, found their way to a part of the steamer where many negroes were assembled. Among these they were perfectly at home. Snag, indeed, made so many friends among the black folk, that he was moved to take Billy Mahone from the bandbox and exhibit the war-loving gamecock to those about him.

“He doesn’t know the name of defeat,” proudly said his owner, waxing eloquent. “There ain’t a bird in the country that can lick him. As

soon as they hear about him in Washington, they're going to take the American eagle off the silver dollar and put Billy's likeness there."

Virginia darkies, as a rule, are not so much interested in game chickens as they are in poultry of "frying size" dimensions. Fowls of the last-mentioned sort, regardless of ownership, learned years ago to "roost high." Billy Mahone, therefore, did not create quite the sensation that Snag had hoped.

One grizzled old darky, wearing a paper collar, black shoestring cravat, "biled shirt," well greased boots and frock coat, noted the boy's disappointment and said, "He's a peart-looking rooster an' no mistake, young gempmun. Hops around so mighty sassy you'd think he owns dis state. But I hopes you gwine lissen to me an' keep him out my part de world. If he sot foot down thar he sho' goin' to be sorry for he gwine know defeat."

"Where do you live and what makes you think that?" asked Snag rather peevishly.

"I'se from Charles City, boss," laughed the old man, who was a preacher, "and all de quality

folks 'round about Dancin' Pint, white de same as cullud, knows me. But not meanin' no disrespect to you nor your rooster, we got a fowl down thar dat can make dat thar bird squawk."

"What sorter fowl?" asked Snag indignantly.

"Dat's whar you gits me, young gempmun. I ain't nebber sot eyes on him but I hearn tell o' him an' I seen his footsteps in de sand — yassir, all four of 'em. He doan wear no ladies' size shoes, neither."

"But how can he have four feet and be a bird?" said Snag, much puzzled.

Here a young negro of eighteen butted into the conversation. "Brother Jasper really doan know whether he's talkin' about a fowl or not," said he. "He's alludin' to a strange monster that's got everybody talkin'. White folks, tryin' to scare us colored people, calls it 'the Charles City dragon.' We colored folks is keepin' quiet. Them as has faith in the Lord need fear no evil."

Ham and Snag, always shrewd observers, at this point became conscious that the other negroes in their mysterious way were signaling the speakers to shut their mouths. Young as they

were the boys knew that there's nobody so hard to pump as a wary darky, so they left the group.

Off alone to themselves again, the boys exchanged a hundred guesses as to what "the Charles City dragon" might be. Each expressed a burning desire to face the creature and do battle with it. Ham, who was of a romantic nature, still secretly hoped that a princess was somehow held in bondage by the monster and that he could rescue her. Snag, of a more practical turn of mind, wondered if he could slay the dragon with his gravel-shooters.

Busy as these thoughts kept the two young knights, they nevertheless found time, before reaching Wilson's wharf, to get a good look at each of the men who had figured in the bar-room quarrel.

CHAPTER VII

A BATTLE ON THE WATERFRONT

It had been previously arranged by letter that Captain Benjamin Taliaferro Christian, a brother of Ham's mother, was to meet the boys at Wilson's wharf. "Uncle Ben" was an ex-Confederate soldier, who in his day had done some hustling with General "Jeb" Stuart, the great cavalryman. But after the surrender at Appomattox the good man ceased to hustle. In 1880 nobody would have dreamed of hurrying Uncle Ben, nor had he ever been known to get anywhere on time.

Understanding her kinsman's weaknesses, Mrs. Willingham had warned the boys beforehand that they might have a long wait at the wharf. This proved to be the case. But it didn't worry Ham and Snag. Time was nothing to them, and for once in their lives they felt they would never be hungry again. So the two just moseyed and

nosed around the wharf watching the stevedores handling the freight.

Suddenly from amongst a pile of big wooden boxes there arose something which at first glance appeared to be a pair of bluejeans breeches possessed of the power to walk and stir about. Closer inspection revealed that the breeches — a huge pair of overalls — contained an overgrown youth about fifteen years of age. As the waist of his trousers struck him almost under the armpits, it was hard to tell what manner of boy he was. His head, however, could not fail to attract attention. It was crowned with a tousled shock of straw-colored hair, and below the hair was a freckled face that showed remarkable shrewdness. Beneath the lad's lemon-colored eyebrows, which worked up and down in a most quizzical way, were two blue eyes that fairly danced with fun.

Here was a boy worth noticing. Ham and Snag were quick to give him the "once over." The individual in the breeches was equally quick to size up the strangers.

"Hi there, tubby," he yelled at the plump

Mr. Willingham, "does your Ma know you're out? Seems to me she'd be afraid all that soap grease would melt in the sun."

"Git back in your Pa's pants, you great big gasbagging lummux, and quit your gabbing," replied Ham defiantly.

Not the least bit abashed at this reference to his attire, the youth in overalls began bawling at the top of his voice.

"Fat boy, fat boy, you're talking through you hat, boy. Your physical architecture is a kind that couldn't please. Fat boy, fat boy, you don't know where you're at, boy. I've mashed the man who acts upon the high trapeze."

So engrossed did the occupant of the bluejeans breeches become as he sang his song, that he failed to observe the nearer approach of Ham. The latter, it should be explained, was now "fighting mad," nor did it sweeten his temper to see that Snag was giggling as he had never giggled before.

Just as the songster concluded the line, "I've mashed the man who acts upon the high trapeze," something hit him—something that felt like a tightly filled flour bag. Dazed as he

was, the musical youth heard a voice crying, "And I've smashed *you* in the smeller."

It was Ham who had delivered the punch and a dandy one it was, too — that is, from the viewpoint of everybody except the boy in overalls.

That youth literally rocked under the blow for a moment and then his sun-cured "smeller," already almost as red as a tomato, began to bleed freely. But the boy was game and the terrible thing about him was that he laughed. "Holy smoke," he chuckled as he spat blood, "that sure was a socdolager, but it's my time now. I'm going to eat you up alive."

With that he seemed to rise up out of his breeches like a Jack-in-the-box. Ham immediately became conscious that he had "bitten off more than he could chew" and that some of his own blood was likely to be spilled now. Nor was he wrong. Before he could get up his guards what seemed a mountain of flesh and bone smote him in the right eye.

Then the fight was on in earnest, for each combatant had received a "stinging up." The wonder is that Ham was not beaten to a pulp under

the long reach of his adversary. But something protected him against great odds and he gave a pretty good account of himself. Among other things he left a highly ornamental bump on the forehead of his opponent, to say nothing of temporarily enlarging the country boy's chin.

Perhaps there are some who may wish to know what Snag was doing all this time. Well, he was doing absolutely nothing—that is, nothing except risking the welfare of his Sunday knickerbockers by sitting on a bundle of barb-wire as he watched the fight.

Not a word said Snag. Never once did he “root” for his friend; never once did he offer a sign of encouragement to him. He was there to see fair play and he hoped to heaven Ham wouldn't “get all skint up,” but he wasn't going to interfere by so much as the crook of a finger. Snag's sense of ethics forbade that. At the very outset he had observed that the gawk in overalls was all alone without backers or supporters, so he immediately resolved to keep quiet. The boy spirit of square dealing kept Snag mute, although he longed to shout encouragement.

Things were not going at all well for Nigger's master when all of a sudden the flooring of the wharf resounded with a loud, whacking noise as if someone were beating the planks with a baseball bat. A second later a voice thundered, "Here! Here! HERE!! Stop it; STOP IT, I say, before I brain you both. Confound your cussed hides, you young devils, I'll take you by the nape of your necks and fling you into the river."

It was Uncle Ben who had unexpectedly arrived on the scene. Uncle Ben may be described in few words. He chewed tobacco and had a wooden leg. These were the most noticeable things about him. It was his stout hickory limb that had made the thumping noise on the wharf as he rushed to the pugilists.

Through two half-closed eyes — for the hick in the bluejeans breeches had been getting in some terrible work — Ham saw his kinsman for the first time. Uncle Ben at that period was well beyond forty. He wore whiskers and Confederate gray, not to mention a slouch hat, a turndown collar and a black shoestring tie which always

was untied. Though he had the voice of a fog-horn and stamped about on his peg leg like a galloping dray horse, he was the most amiable of souls and never made an enemy in his life.

Ham loved Ben from the first moment he saw him. So did Snag. As for the holy terror who had almost climbed out of his pants to fight, it was plain that he also respected Uncle Ben. He deferentially addressed the veteran as "Captain," and was quick to pick up that gentleman's flaming red bandanna when the latter dropped it.

So the fight came to an abrupt end — perhaps to the great satisfaction of both warriors — and Uncle Ben, in a much milder voice, said, "Well, this is a pretty kettle of fish — all this blankety-blank to-do on a public wharf. Dern you, I'll give you two tough young rowdies to the Charles City Dragon. They say he can digest everything. Why, the more I think of it the madder I get. Who started all this rumpus, anyhow?"

"Me," grinned the gawk in overalls as he wiped his bloody hands on his hair. "I ought notta said he was fat, though he sure ain't no bean-pole."

“Me,” said Ham, almost the same instant. “I called him a great big gasbagging lummux and told him to git out of his Pa’s pants, which he certainly does look like he’s wearin’.”

“A pretty exchange of compliments, indeed,” roared Uncle Ben with a chuckle as he bespattered his whiskers with tobacco juice. “But I reckon ’twas a fair fight and I’m mighty sorry I didn’t see it all. Now kiss and make up, boys.”

At this both youngsters shied perceptibly. They really thought the Captain was in earnest about the kissing, and that was just a little too much for them. They had not reached the kissing age. Ham backed off in one direction and the country boy in the other.

At this juncture Jefferson Davis Perkins, who up to now had kept very quiet, intervened to save the day. “The one-legged gentleman don’t actually mean for you two to smack each other in the face like gals,” said that much-interested onlooker. “He jest means for you to shake hands and be friends.”

“Oh, that’s different,” said Ham, much relieved. “I’m willin’.”

“Me, too,” added the gawk. “I ain’t got no hard feelin’s. And my nose, it never will be hard again; it feels like mush. Here, Tubby, give us your corn-sheller.”

And so the episode closed, with honors even, in a friendly shake.

CHAPTER VIII

BILLY MAHONE TACKLES A GIANT

As soon as things had settled down a little after the encounter between Ham and the gawk in overalls, Uncle Ben began stumping around as lively as a hen with one chicken. He told the boys they had made him lose a lot of important time, and that all hands would have to hurry off, or they would miss their dinner. The plantation, he explained, was known as "Heron's Nest," and was about two miles down the river. It was to be the summer abiding place of the boys.

Ham and Snag, with the assistance of the tow-sle-headed youth, rapidly gathered up their belongings with the idea of placing them in the captain's ramshackle buggy. But the start was not yet to be made. Uncle Ben, by now, had met another ex-Confederate soldier who just "happened along," and the two were living over again the experience they underwent "endurin'" of

the war between the states. That meant the loss of at least another hour in a region where a thousand years are but as a day.

So the boys, quite willing to tarry, settled down for a second wait. They were not long in learning that the fighting machine in bluejeans was known locally as "Buck" Timberlake. Furthermore he was a cracking good fellow, ready to try anything at least once and apparently not afraid of anything on earth.

Buck told his new-found friends that he was "poor but proud." He said his mother was dead, and that his Pa, without having anything particular the matter with him, "kept po'ly all the time and had to sit around." This was the lad's kindly way of announcing that he was compelled to support not only himself but his parent by such odd jobs on land or water as he could find in the neighborhood. He added that he was eager to get as much "schoolin'" as he could and even then had progressed as far as the seventh grade.

"Whatcher goin' to be when you're a man?" quizzed Snag, who was naturally curious.

To the amazement of both the city boys, Buck, without a moment's hesitation, answered, "A preacher." Then in the next breath he whirled around at Snag and said abruptly, "Whatcher got in that pasteboard box you're toting around so careful? "

"A game rooster," proudly replied the owner of Billy Mahone, "and he ain't never been whipped."

"I got sumthin' can lick him," said the would-be preacher.

"What? " snapped Snag, all a-bristle.

"Jest another rooster — that's all."

"Trot him out," shouted Snag, bouncing up off a pile of lumber.

"I don't carry him round with me like he was a baby," said Buck. "He ain't that kinder bird. But he's always ready for business. I call him Puddin' and he stays in our back yard. We live jest a little piece down the road. Let's take that old buzzard of yourn down thar and see the two birds 'knock' a little."

"It's like takin' candy from a child," said Snag grinning. "I hate to do it. You won't

have nothing left of Puddin' after Billy Mahone has been peckin on him two minutes. Still, I'm willin' and I know Billy is."

As if to corroborate his master's statement, the silver duckwing at this juncture crowed defiantly in his pasteboard prison.

A minute later the boys had grabbed up the bandbox and started for the home of Buck Timberlake. Seeing the commotion, Uncle Ben belled out, "Hi there! you young whippersnappers, what're you up to?"

"We're just goin' to have a little rooster fight," said Ham, in a mild tone of voice such as boys always use when caught in mischief.

"What?" yelled Uncle Ben, "a rooster fight, did you say? Where? When? Why, dern my buttons, I'll see it myself." With that he sprang to his feet—or rather to his surviving foot—utterly forgetful of the fact that he was leaving Generals U. S. Grant and R. E. Lee locked in a desperate military encounter. The other old soldier did the same. Like Uncle Ben, he had plenty of sporting blood.

Thus it came to pass that Billy Mahone and

Puddin' did battle before a most appreciative group of spectators. Even Pa Timberlake, though feeling unusually "po'ly," deigned to view the contest, which was one of the oddest cockfights on record.

After seeing Buck Timberlake fight, Snag, always wise as a serpent, fully realized the boy in overalls was not the kind to "blow" without cause. His instinct told him, therefore, that Buck's Puddin' must be an extraordinary bird. But he was none the less shocked and amazed when he actually saw the cock guaranteed to wallop Billy Mahone.

Puddin' was nothing short of a monstrosity. He was a gigantic, heavily built mongrel bird of red and buff with a short, scrubby tail and an outlay of feathers that went clean down to his toes. The city boys gave him the palm for being "the biggest rooster in captivity." Dressed for the table he probably would have weighed ten pounds. His huge feet looked like the claws of some prehistoric reptile and his spurs reminded one of cow horns.

But he was no slacker. The little streak of

game mixed in with his conglomerate Cochinchina, Shanghai and Plymouth Rock blood made him bold and aggressive. In fact, Puddin' seemed "spoiling for trouble" all the time, and crowed incessantly when not clucking to the hens to gather around and inspect the worms he scratched up. All these he ungallantly ate himself, though he probably meant well in letting his many wives see them.

Snag, on getting a good look at the enormous bird, had serious doubts as to what would happen to his seven-pound fowl. "That ain't no rooster," said he rather scornfully, "that's an ostrich you're raising for the beef market."

"It's a bird that's never been licked," retorted Buck Timberlake, "and what's more, he ain't never going to be licked."

The son of the house of Perkins demanded ten minutes time so that his rooster, now somewhat cramped by confinement in the box, might have a chance to "stretch" himself. Everybody agreed to this, though the silver duckwing, of course, had to be taken out of the sight and hearing of Buck Timberlake's red champion.

Billy Mahone was about the loveliest thing in the way of trim rooster-flesh that Virginia had ever produced — tall, slender, erect and graceful, with the look of an aristocrat from the tip of his short gray beak to the ends of his blue toes. Needless to say his comb and wattles had been trimmed away until his head looked like that of an eagle.

Lovingly Snag bore the knightly bird in his arms to the scene of battle. No sooner did Billy see Puddin' than he crowed, whereat the red monster, standing some thirty feet away, belowed a hoarse challenge that sounded as if he were braying in a barrel.

Snag relaxed his hold on the gamecock. Instantly Billy flew to the fray. He landed ten feet in front of his enemy. With great danger to himself he paused immediately upon striking the ground to crow again. Then he darted at Puddin' like a bolt of lightning.

But the red monster, there to defend his wives and children as well as the good name of Charles City, gave not an inch. Or rather, to put it more accurately, he met the onslaught with a terrific

impact which sent Billy Mahone reeling back five feet.

“Ge-e-e-e-e, what a lick!” exclaimed Ham, in deference to the skill shown by the gigantic Puddin’. “That ain’t no rooster — that’s a steam locomotive wrapped up in feather mattresses.”

“Quityer gabbin’ and let ’em knock,” yelled Snag, somewhat impatiently, for he didn’t at all like the way things were going. Then, too, he thought Ham ought to root for Billy Mahone.

“That kildee of yourn is jest wasting his time,” tauntingly cried Buck Timberlake, now in great glee. “The po’ thing is buttin’ into a brick wall. I hate to see a bird commit suicide.”

As if to prove the truth of Buck’s assertions, the silver duckwing vainly tried the same tactics a second time; then a third, a fourth, a fifth, and so on until he had made eleven attempts to rush the red monster. Always the same result — always the shock that sent the valiant bird reeling backward.

Then Snag beheld a sight that sickened him. Billy Mahone did not return. Worse still, his left wing projected from his body and drooped help-

lessly. Puddin's huge cowhorn spurs had injured it. The wounded bird would have to be careful about flying now.

None seemed to realize this more than Billy himself. At a safe distance he paused, deliberately picked up a sharp-edged pebble and swallowed it with apparent relish, as though the tiny stone were the most delicious dainty on earth. Such pebbles go into chickens' gizzards and help them to grind their food. But the silver duckwing was not thinking about food. He had other things in mind. It was his purpose to make the red monster do some of the rushing now.

Deceived by the gamecock's trick, Puddin' fell right into the trap. He made a fearful lunge at Billy Mahone and missed him. Then over and over again he tried to strike the silver duckwing but always without results. That bird invariably dodged.

Disgusted with this sort of play, Buck yelled, "Git my rooster something that can fight. He's tired of projeckin' with a side-stepper."

"He'll have something to fight, all right, in a minute," replied Snag, still supremely confident.

This soon proved to be true. Puddin' began to lose wind. He was overtaxing his great bulk with too much unwonted activity. His yellow beak flew open — a bad sign in a fighting rooster. Never once, however, did the great bird show fear. On the contrary he seemed to grow more pugnacious. But all the time Billy Mahone, still fresh as a pansy, kept inching up on his opponent; and all the time Puddin' got weaker.

Finally the gamecock, dragging his wounded wing, came alongside his opponent, and try as he might, the larger bird could not reach him. Then Billy saw his chance. He seized Puddin's comb, clung on to it with a bulldog grip and proceeded to pound his enemy with feet and spurs.

Nobody can say how all this would have ended, for while the red monster was receiving terrific punishment, he nevertheless was finding a chance to get his second wind. But just as the fight had reached its most critical point a fearful noise, as of wild beasts, drew the attention of all in another direction.

After various sniffings, bristlings and deep-throated growlings, Buck's big white mongrel

dog, part shepherd and part bull, had tackled Nigger, and the two animals now were at each other's throats.

In the excitement following, the owners of both roosters instinctively rushed to their birds and separated them, while the others ran to part the dogs.

“Great day in the morning! What a thunderin’ lot of fights we’ve had since breakfast,” exclaimed Ham when peace was restored.

Just then both Puddin’ and Billy Mahone crowed lustily, which at least showed that they hadn’t had enough of bloodshed.

CHAPTER IX

BUCK PAYS A VISIT IN "STORE CLOTHES"

It need hardly be said that Ham and Snag, before leaving the country gawk, Buck Timberlake, asked him to come over to see them at Heron's Nest. A boy who could fight like Buck and who possessed such a rooster as Puddin', to say nothing of the dog that tried to whip Nigger, was not to be sneezed at.

To the surprise of both Richmonders the Charles City native seemed embarrassed by the invitation. At first he said nothing. Then he explained that he had to "hop around pretty lively to make a living" and didn't find much leisure for idling. While offering this explanation, Buck looked inquiringly out of a corner of his eye at Uncle Ben.

The latter, hearing the conversation, was quick to say, "Why, yes, Buck, we'd all be delighted to see you. Come often and stay long. There's

always a plenty of he-pig and corn bread for our friends. You can help these whippersnappers amuse themselves, and I know, too, that you'll keep 'em out of mischief. You're a good steady boy, Buck, and a little play won't hurt you."

After such an invitation as that, the country lad hesitated no longer. He promised to show up at the first opportunity. Enough words had been passed, however, to make Ham and Snag see Buck was not the kind to push himself where he was not wanted. His station in life was different from theirs and that of Uncle Ben, and in Charles City (as elsewhere in the Old Dominion) there were persons who talked of nothing but their family trees.

Ham and Snag didn't worry in the least about blue blood and ancestors, but all the same each of them felt a thrill when they saw the old homestead at Heron's Nest. The ancient brick house had a dilapidated dignity that could not fail to be impressive. It lacked paint everywhere and in some places was literally falling to pieces, yet neither the flight of years nor the indigence of its present occupants could alter its unmistak-

able air of aristocracy. Everything about the place told a pathetic story of former grandeur. Even the venerable mossgrown oaks, the aging cedars, the huge waxy magnolias, the tangle of old-time garden flowers and the ragged hedges of boxwood seemed to whisper a requiem of better days long dead.

Over this shattered estate, beaten down by the remorseless hoof of war and well-nigh strangled by the poverty following the period of Reconstruction, presided Uncle Ben. He had come back from the hostilities a broken man with but one leg and no ambition to work. All that he could bring himself to do in 1880 was to dream of the past, chew tobacco and boss a few lazy negroes who pretended to labor on the plantation. Uncle Ben was a loud-talking, good-natured bachelor with an overwhelming dread of all women save his two aged relatives, Cousins Millie and Betty Lou Latane, spinster sisters, who kept house for him.

These indigent old maids also had been left behind in the march of progress. On meeting a stranger they invariably asked the names of his

grandparents, and unless the ancestors could measure up to their standards, the stranger enjoyed little more of their attention. Yet at heart Cousins Millie and Betty Lou were the kindest and most charitable of gentlewomen.

It was into this circle that Buck Timberlake came one morning about a week after the arrival of Ham and Snag to spend the day at Heron's Nest with his new found friends. But it was a different Buck from the gawk in overalls. The would-be preacher now wore his "Sunday-go-to-meetin'" store clothes and looked almost like a city boy except for his brogan shoes. His whole appearance seemed to have changed, and furthermore, his speech also was altered. He no longer said "ain't" and "git," and it shocked Ham and Snag to note the way he avoided double negatives. Evidently Buck had his "company manners" with him. He even thawed out Misses Millie and Betty Lou by his graceful attentions, which was going some, for they regarded him as "po'-white."

As soon as the boys could steal away from the grown-ups — which they were not slow to do

— Buck slipped back into his loose way of talking, which was a great comfort to his friends. Ham and Snag, at that time of their lives, always felt uncomfortable in the presence of good grammar, either written or spoken. They deliberately made awful mistakes in speech so that nobody could call them “sissies.”

But now here came Buck, completely changing their views. “In the presence of ladies,” said this strange gawk, “a fellow should constantly be on his p’s and q’s and try not to talk like a darky. I read a lot of nights when our old kerosene lamp has got ile and a wick in it, and I notice the stuff in books don’t sound nothing at all like common, everyday talk.”

Ham, who was also something of a reader, had likewise noticed this, but he didn’t want his grammatical shortcomings “rubbed in” on him, so he changed the subject in rather an ugly way.

“Charles City is a mighty measly sort of county, ain’t it, Buck?” he asked with a strange forgetfulness of the fact that to every man his native land is grand and beautiful. “I notice on the map of Virginia it’s a little bit of a place,

and they say it ain't got one-tenth as many people as Richmond."

At this remark every hair on Buck's head seemed to bristle. "Charles City a measly county!" he scornfully repeated. "Why, listen to that! Who would have thought it; and you in the first grade at high school? It's the honorablest, distinguishedest county in the *whole world*. What other has given two presidents (Harrison and Tyler) to the United States and furnished the grandfather and great-grandfather of another? Why, they call it the 'presidential county.' Don't you know it produced the mother of General Robert E. Lee and five congressmen and whole lots of judges and — and — and — and —?"

"And the Charles City dragon," smilingly put in Ham at this juncture.

This remark at first seemed to knock the wind out of Buck as a county booster. For a moment he said nothing and then he sent forth his awful horse laugh. "Yes," he said, "we've got a dragon, too, and I ain't lyin' when I say she's the largest ever seen on earth."

“Why do you call the dragon a ‘she’?” inquired Snag. “I suppose there must be he-dragons and she-dragons just as there are hens and roosters and ladies and gentlemen, but somehow I never thought of it that way.”

At this question Buck, who hitherto had appeared to feel a little bit uncomfortable in his Sunday clothes, almost split his sides with mirth. “Well, sirs, I’ll tell you how it is,” said he. “The lady dragon of Charles City is nothing more or less than an old cow sturgeon.”

“A cow sturgeon—what’s that?” exclaimed both youngsters in one breath.

Buck gave another whoop of glee at the inquiry. “For the land’s sake,” chuckled he, “ignorant as you two town boys are of everything touchin’ Charles City, I did suppose you knew that a sturgeon is a great big horny-lookin’ feesh; and, of course, a ‘cow sturgeon’ is a she-grown-up sturgeon. We call the old he-ones ‘buck sturgeons.’ That’s how I get the name they call me by down here. I’ve caught my share of buck sturgeons and everybody knows it. They make heap better eatin’ than the cows.

“ Our hifalutin’ dragon is nuthin’ but a nailin’ big female somewhere’s near seven feet long and weighing mighty nigh 400 pounds, I reckon. She’s gittin’ ready to spawn and is most poppin’ open with eggs. I seen that cow jumpin’ out of the water less than two weeks ago. Looks like we can’t ketch her. She’s bust through two or three drift nets.”

Ham and Snag listened intently to all that Buck said, and yet the puzzled look on their faces was slow to wear off. Finally the latter remarked, “ You ain’t actin’ like you wantter fool us, but your story don’t gee horses with what other people have told us. A colored man on the *Ariel* said the dragon left footprints on the sand and that he’d seen ’em. Now, who ever heard of a fish having feet and even if he — or she — did, what business would they have to go walkin’ round on sand? ”

Of course Buck had to guffaw at this also. “ I’ve heard that yarn, too,” he replied, “ but I don’t take no stock in it. If you listen to everything you hear darkies sayin’, you’ll go clean looney. There’s an old drunken darky

around here — they call him ‘ Gumbo ’ or ‘ Gummy ’— who even insists he has seen the dragon face to face. What’s more, he swears that he himself actually let the varmint out of a box.

“ When you hear Gumbo spoutin’ you can hardly help believin’ him, he tells such a straight tale. The only thing that keeps me from gittin’ my head turned by the tale is that I happen to know Gummy is plum crazy at times. He believes in hants and conjuration, too, and when not off in his head he soaks cheap whiskey. Just before he started this dragon lie he had the delirium tremens from drink and swore he saw nothing but lizards, big lizards and little lizards — just oodles of ’em.”

Really it did look as if Buck had “ knocked the socks ” off all the talk about the Charles City dragon. But the Richmond boys were determined to believe in the existence of the monster. Then, too, they vastly preferred a real, honest-to-goodness dragon to a plain, ordinary old cow sturgeon. Ham, in truth, had set his heart on killing the dragon, while Snag longed for a few cracks at it with his trusty gravel-shooter.

So it is not to be wondered at that Ham, as a parting shot, had this to say, "Well, anyhow, it was a preacher who told us that the thing had feet and said he'd seen the footprints."

"If 'twas a preacher, why, then, I ain't got no more to say," replied Buck, somewhat abashed. "We preachers all gotta stand together and we don't lie. But dragon or no dragon, I swear I've seen the old cow sturgeon, and she sure ain't no bull minnow in size."

CHAPTER X

“ MISHE-NAHMA, KING OF FISHES ”

Buck Timberlake, as may be gathered from what already has been said, had plenty of poetry in the soul beneath his rough exterior. But the boy probably would have been disgusted had he known that Longfellow wrote these lines in connection with Hiawatha's fishing:

“On the white sand of the bottom
Lay the monster, Mishe-Nahma,
Lay the sturgeon, King of Fishes.”

No man is particularly in love with the things that help him to earn his daily bread; and Buck, young as he was, had put in some pretty hard licks catching sturgeon, at that time one of the chief industries of the Charles City water front. The boy didn't regard the big buck fish as the least bit kingly nor did he consider the “ cows ” in any way queenly. On the contrary, he had a

great contempt for the representatives of both sexes. He was correct in his judgment, too. The sturgeon is an ignoble fish. It lives to eat — and be eaten. It is neither beautiful nor game.

Vicente Blasco Ibanez, the celebrated Spanish novelist, in his great novel, “*Mare Nostrum*,” gives a description of the sturgeon that would have suited Buck Timberlake. After telling how the codfish, a devourer of herring, multiplies by millions, the author goes on to explain that but for the greed of the sturgeon, which eats the cod, the latter would soon overrun the seas of the world. Then he adds that the sturgeon, which also reproduces in unbelievable numbers, would likewise upset the equilibrium of the animal kingdom were it not for the interference of a “superior glutton,” the shark, which in turn eats the sturgeon.

Fortunately this last mentioned “destroyer” (according to the Spanish writer) brings forth only one baby shark, though that youngster, says Ibanez, “is born armed and ferocious, ready from the very first moment to continue the paternal exploits like a feudal heir.”

Virginia can lay no claim to the greedy sturgeon as one of her exclusive products. The big fish, which is anadromous (that is, a dweller in the sea save when it comes into fresh water to spawn) once was common along the Southern Atlantic seaboard. It is rapidly becoming extinct, however, for man has proved a far worse enemy than the shark.

Yet even today an occasional sturgeon, like some ghost of the past, is caught in the fish traps beneath the river bridges of Richmond. Such catches now are regarded as sensational and attract widespread attention. Yet the people of Colonial times, or even in Buck Timberlake's day, would have laughed at any attention attracted by a sturgeon. As soon would they have expected one to pause to look at an ordinary milch cow.

An accurate historian, Philip A. Bruce, writing of the Old Dominion of the seventeenth century, tells us that Sir Thomas Dale secured over 5,000 of these fish in one cast of the seine. It is recorded of another group of Virginia colonists that on one occasion "they drew to the shore a

struggling mass of surgeon and other fish that would have afforded a full cargo for an ordinary frigate.” Captain John Smith—he of Pocahontas fame—also has left us a thrilling “fish story.” Says he, writing entirely about himself (as he usually did): “I once took 52 sturgeons at a draught; at another 68.”

Sturgeon meat today sells in Richmond at from 40 to 60 cents a pound, according to the season, and is considered a luxury which only the well-to-do can afford. The fish marketed, except in rare cases, no longer come from Virginia waters. They are shipped to the Old Dominion capital from North Carolina.

In 1880 things were different. James river sturgeon then were consigned to Richmond by the boatload, and the meat could be purchased at five cents a pound.

So numerous were the sturgeon in Virginia waters before and during Buck Timberlake’s boyhood days that the darkies not only ate the meat all during the summer, but cured it for winter use. Cured sturgeon, however, was not regarded as aristocratic diet. Prosperous people “turned

up their noses " at it, and sneeringly alluded to the stuff as " Charles City bacon."

The fate of the sturgeon became sealed when Americans, following the example of the Russians, awoke to a realization of the fact that the eggs, or roe, of the fish furnished a table delicacy which few water foods can surpass. No need of sharks to keep down the sturgeon " population " after this discovery! Man took the work in hand and the effects of his ruthlessness are all too evident. Today the sturgeon is rarely seen in the American rivers and lakes where once it disported itself in countless thousands; and caviar, the canned product of its eggs, is almost worth its weight in silver. Yet less than three-quarters of a century ago people carelessly threw away the roe and disdained the eating of it. They gave a preference to the flesh of the buck sturgeon, a smaller fish than the " cow."

In the good old days " befo' de war " and up into the eighties, the sturgeon, along with the shad, came to Charles City as early as April and remained until September. Among the writhing, wriggling horde that swarmed the waters were

some specimens that had attained a length of ten feet and weighed possibly 500 pounds; those undoubtedly were patriarchal exceptions. More commonly one saw five and six footers in the market, while the great majority — certainly in the early spring — were little fellows about three feet long. If the truth were known, it probably would be found these were the kind Captain John Smith landed when he had such a good day's sport. But the Captain was not the kind of chap to ruin a yarn with such details as that.

Though well equipped to make himself disagreeable, the sturgeon puts up little or no fight when caught and is usually rolled into the boat like a log.

Nobody can say that this ever-hungry denizen of the deep is a beauty. Even a catfish can "give him cards and spades" on good looks. But the sturgeon is about as little like a catfish as a greyhound is like a pug dog. His coloring on the back and sides is a sombre, nondescript brown which shades into white on the stomach. Most noticeable of his ugly features is his conical, tapering snout.

If you look up Mr. Buck and Mrs. Cow Sturgeon in your encyclopedia, you will be told by that book that their head is "completely invested by ganoid plates, some of which are median, while on the body these plates are arranged in longitudinal rows with smaller plates between." Just what all this means only a few of us know. Perhaps it is a learned way of saying that the sturgeon is encased in a hide that is full of great horny scales — scales running lengthwise down the body like ridges of mountains. One sees the same sort of hide on a crocodile, and in the good old days described in fairy tales, dragons also must have had them.

The old cow sturgeon described by Buck Timberlake, probably paraded herself around while trying to find a place in which to deposit her eggs. This duty she would accomplish from time to time by rubbing herself on the rocks and stumps under the water. The friction helped the job. Her family responsibilities were heavy. If she was like the other lady sturgeons of Charles City, she was due to lay anywhere from one to two million eggs. That meant a family of some

size. Think of having to wash the faces, hands and ears of one or two million children. And what a lot of scolding she must have had to do to keep her little ones from getting wet on rainy days! However, you will find no speculation along this line in the encyclopedia.

CHAPTER XI

UNCLE BEN TALKS OF DANCING POINT

Ham and Snag had hardly been at Heron's Nest two weeks before they altogether ceased to worry about their misdeeds and misfortunes in Richmond. No more did the fat boy fear that his footsteps were being "dogged," and no more did Snag imagine the penitentiary or the gallows awaited him and his friend.

Possibly Uncle Ben's newspaper had something to do with this ease of mind. At any rate, it revealed that none of the grave-robbers had been caught, or were likely to be caught, despite the supposed activity of the police. What was better still, the same newspaper a few days before had announced a remarkable sequel to Nigger's rescue from the dog pound.

The morning after the big Newfoundland and his humble associates escaped from the toils of the law, a reporter got wind of the "story."

Evidently he was a good, kind-hearted reporter who loved dogs and boys, for he seemed to surmise almost exactly what had actually happened. This sympathetic soul wrote a clever, half-humorous, half-pathetic article, which, after describing the escape, pictured the heartaches of a boy who loses his pup at the hands of the dog-catchers.

The "story" set the whole town laughing. Even the police and the poundmaster chuckled over it. Then happened the oddest thing of all. An eccentric rich man, touched by what he had read in the *Dispatch*, declared he would pay that year's dog licenses for every poor boy in Richmond. There must have been many poor boys with an astonishing number of equally poor curs in the town, for this act of generosity cost the eccentric rich man nearly \$500 and put the dog-catchers out of business for many months.

It seemed the very irony of fate that neither Nigger nor his master benefited by the goodness of the philanthropist since they were both out of the city. Nevertheless boy and dog alike kept cheerful. Nigger in his new realm made friends

with people quite as readily as did Ham. So far as his fellow dogs were concerned, he was rather "stand-offish." He did not even deign to notice the hounds on the plantation, but he soon came to amicable terms with Buck's big bristler, and that was something to be thankful for.

Snag and his gamecock, Billy Mahone, were not so quick to horn into the good graces of those about them. Misses Millie and Betty Lou did not at all like the idea of having their cowardly Dominique roosters walloped daily by the silver duckwing. Not until these awkward fowls had learned to put up their back feathers and scoot, was there peace in the barnyard. Even then it was purchased only by letting Billy Mahone be absolutely cock of the walk.

As for Snag, with his not-too-clean ears, his grimy hands and his dreadful gravel-shooters, he was long a "suspicious character" in the eyes of the two old maids. On the very first day the spinsters exacted from him a solemn pledge that he would shoot none of the birds about the place except the English sparrows, which already had begun to thrust aside the robins, the tom-tits, the

wrens, the catbirds and the mocking birds.

In course of time, however, Snag won all hearts, and long before he left Charles City he often had occasion to blush uncomfortably when he overheard the ladies describing him as "a very sweet, cute boy."

Uncle Ben, for his part, couldn't see enough of "those derved city whippersnappers," as he called his guests, and though he still roared and thundered at Ham and Snag, they could twist him around their fingers.

This was well illustrated one morning. The one-legged veteran announced that he was going over to Dancing Point, a small river community a few miles away, to arrange for the cutting of some railroad ties. His business, he said, would keep him from home a week or more, and Buck Timberlake was to accompany him as handy man. The two were to live in a shack in true camp fashion and a negro fisherman was to cook for them. "Boys, it's near the place where the Charles City dragon is supposed to live," said Uncle Ben, laughing. "If I kill him I'll bring you back a few teeth and maybe a claw."

Little did Uncle Ben realize what a sensation his remarks were going to cause. He had hardly announced his plans when Ham and Snag began pleading that they might accompany him and Buck. "Don't leave us behind," begged the youngsters. "Where Buck Timberlake can go we surely can follow on land or water. We're crazy to live in a cabin, and honest, we're simply dying to see the dragon."

"It's not to be thought of for a second," snapped Cousin Millie, who was stoutly backed up by Cousin Betty Lou. "Those boys will certainly catch fever and ague in the swamps. Who ever heard of such a thing, Ben? You ought to be ashamed of yourself even to listen to such a proposition. Why! the idea of risking the lives of two delicate little fellows on such a wild-goose chase as that. Even if they escape sickness, they'll get their feet wet, or fall in the river, or be bitten by a snake or — something."

"You're exactly right, Cousin Millie, and so are you, Cousin Betty Lou," soothingly replied Uncle Ben. "I'd be ashamed to look the mothers of these two boys in the face if I subjected

them to such risks. Buck and I are goin' in some mighty out-of-the-way places where kids couldn't navigate. I reckon it will be a sight better to leave the brats here and let you two coddle 'em up with camphor and Peruvian bark and mutton suet and buttermilk and sweet potato pies."

What a deceitful old rascal Uncle Ben was! Even as he spoke the peg-leg veteran slyly winked an eye at Ham, and that young American instantly knew that he and Snag had won their point. Cousins Millie and Betty Lou, poor innocents, likewise thought that their wishes would prevail. This belief became a conviction when Uncle Ben yelled at the top of his voice, "Now close your flytraps, you young hellions. I don't want to hear another word about this business. Get your sugar rags and rattles and run off and play."

Half an hour later, while the easy-going Charles Cityan and his worshipers were out in the barn lot looking at a promising bull calf, Ham said to his kinsman: "Uncle Ben, what sorter place is Dancin' Point?"

"Well, Mr. Question Box, it ain't much of a

place to brag about, and we don't have to keep police hanging about to prevent its being stolen. Still, it's all right if you know how to take it. It's been there a long time and it's likely to stay still longer. Right down there in that neck o' the woods the Chickahominy river joins the Jeems. Yessir, I say 'Jeems.' We old-timers don't put on airs and call it James River like you swell city folks do."

"Why do they call it Dancin' Point?"

"You ought to have gumption enough to know that the place gets its name 'Point' from the fact that there is a promontory at the junction of the two streams. As for the rest of the name, that's due to a tradition that was once current among the sailors of the river.

"The property, long, long years ago, was owned by a certain man whose name was — or ought to have been — Lightfoot. On the plantation there was a marsh which the owner was very desirous of clearing up, and tradition says the scheme was violently opposed by the devil. An interview between Old Nick and Lightfoot took place, during which it was agreed that a trial

of dancing should be held to decide whether the marsh should be cleared up or not. The night was appointed and the spot chosen. At the hour the parties to the contest met and began their exercises. Flaming torches and shooting stars from the swamp lighted the ground upon which the trial took place.

“ When morning broke the devil retired, and Lightfoot, who could everlastingly shake a hoof, discovered that the spot formerly occupied by the swamp, was a field high and dry. He had outdanced Old Nick.

“ Lights still float over the field at night and on the ground where the dance took place no grass or herb will grow. A bare spot of a hundred yards in extent even now makes the scene of strife — at least they say it does, though I’ve never seen it. No freedman’s foot crosses the spot after nightfall and no fox there seeks his prey.”

“ Gosh, that’s creepy and skeery, Uncle Ben! ” exclaimed Ham, who was always ready to swallow any yarn — hook, line and rod. “ Do you reckon it’s the truth? ”

“ Well, it may be,” replied Uncle Ben. “ You see it is all said to have happened years and years ago, long before I was born—yes, way back in Colonial times. So you see I wasn’t there, but I can’t say it *ain’t* true. Besides, I know this: it’s as true as the story about the Charles City dragon. But you boys mustn’t expect to find too much dry land where we’re headed for. To tell you the truth we’re mostly going to be in swamps and marshes.”

“ Didn’t you say we were to have a colored cook? ” inquired Snag, who never neglected his appetite. “ What’s his name.”

“ Yes, we’re going to have a crazyfied darky they call ‘ Gumbo ’ or ‘ Gummy ’ for cook.”

“ Ain’t that grand? ” yelled Ham. “ You may shoot me if he ain’t the darky who says he let the dragon out of a box. Bet your bottom dollar I’m going to pump him and get at the truth.”

CHAPTER XII

THE COW STURGEON GETS BUSY

“ Try that trick on me just one time more and I’ll biff you in the sniffer with one of my guffins. I’m daggone tired of your monkeying.”

This remark, which probably would have proved unintelligible even to the average citizen of 1880, was hotly hurled by Hamilton Bacon Willingham at Jefferson Davis Perkins. It meant that Ham, weary of the pranks of Snag, intended to kick him in the nose with his foot unless the latter quit his practical jokes.

There was good excuse for Ham’s indignation. Any other person in his place might have uttered an even more dreadful threat. The two city boys, as well as Buck Timberlake, were swimming in “ the Jeems ” near Dancing Point, and were at least an eighth of a mile from shore in very deep water. It was a superb moonlight

night and the world contained no happier trio than these three youngsters.

But Snag, who could dive like a South Sea islander, had a fiendish way of ducking Ham. The latter, though an indefatigable swimmer, disliked to get his head under water. Knowing this, Snag delighted in submerging himself, coming up beneath Ham, catching him by the foot and dragging him under. He tried this trick several times before the fat boy lost patience. Then Snag stopped, for he saw that his friend was getting angry.

Now the laughable thing about Ham's final threat was the fact that it came at a time when Snag was actually innocent. Therefore that young gentleman replied with virtuous indignation, "I say I ain't laid hands on you for five minutes. If you're skeerd of water you'd better let me tote you back and then keep out of it. I'm way behind you. Maybe 'twas Nigger nosin' up against you."

Ham gave a swift look back to see if this statement could be the truth. Yes, sure enough, it did seem to be the truth. There was Snag trailing

some ten feet in the rear, and following close behind were Buck and Nigger. The Newfoundland was quite as good a swimmer as either of the three boys and always went into the water with them.

"I say you did come up just a second ago and push me," insisted Ham, who never liked to yield a point to Snag.

"And I say you're a liar if you keep on insist-in'," retorted Snag. "What's more, if you don't like it you can lump it soon as we git back on dry land."

Here was cause for a real, old-time, knock-down-and-drag-out boy fight. But the fight never came off. Further hostilities were interrupted by a frantic yell from Ham. "Lord have mercy! The thing has scraped me again," he bawled. "Ouch, ouch, ouch, my leg feels like a great big saw has gone over it."

Hardly were these words out of the youngster's mouth when a huge scaly brown body, gleaming in the moonlight like some slimy reptile of antediluvian days, leaped five feet out of the river with a blood-curdling splash immedi-

ately in front of Ham. Then leaving a trail of foam, it ploughed and churned the waters all about the terrified boy until he was almost mad with fright.

“ Help, help, help! ” screamed Ham, not knowing what to do or whither to turn. “ It’s a man-eatin’ shark and he’s goin’ to chaw me up.”

Almost instantly after sounding this piteous appeal, the boy sensed the approach of assistance. On his left he felt something warm, wet and hairy. It was Nigger, who at the first sign of danger had made a wild lunge for his master. On his right, almost immediately under his stomach, appeared Snag, with eyes nearly popping out of his head.

“ I seen it, too,” said the owner of Billy Mahone, “ and ’twas sumthin’ awful. I’ve got the billywiggles I’m so skeered, but I’ll stick by yer, Ham. ’Tain’t no doubt about its being a shark — a regular man-eater. I’ve read about ’em in geog’fries. But maybe, bein’ a man-eater, it won’t pester itself with boys. Anyhow, I’ll swim right alongside yer. Cousins Millie and Betty Lou says we’re always dirty. Who knows? We

may turn the shark's stomach so he won't want to make a meal of us? "

Just at this juncture another splashing, accompanied by a mighty puffing and blowing, threw a second scare into Ham and Snag. Instinctively glancing around — although both just then would have preferred to shut their eyes and die without a struggle — the boys beheld the face of Buck Timberlake. It was a sight to behold — that face — and at first appeared to be all mouth.

Buck was having convulsions of laughter. At the risk of drowning he'd open his "flytrap" to chuckle, swallow a great gulp of water, spew it out and then laugh again, only to get another deluge. At one time he was spouting and spraying like a whale, but finally he regained self-control and tauntingly cried out, "I wouldn't take a million for it. Plague if it ain't funnier than a box of monkeys. Now you believe me, don't yer? and when I tell you about that old cow sturgeon I reckon you won't beat me down that I'm lyin'."

Ham and Snag were too much relieved at this

information to indulge in any "back talk." Anything was better than a man-eating shark. Furthermore, they were touched when Buck, approaching a little closer, said, "Well, sirs, this is the first time I've ever hearn tell of a sturgeon gittin' people scared. Still, if you feel shaky and don't think you can make shore, I'll try to carry you in even though I bust doin' it. If it's a case of gittin' drowned we'll all do it together."

"Make shore the cat's foot!" exclaimed Snag, much hurt at hearing his and Ham's ability as water rats questioned. "Me and Ham can tie both our arms together and give you swimmin' lessons."

Snag by now had grown so peeved that he really intended to say more, but just then he saw the waters surge up again in a foam-flecked furrow, and as quick as a flash he changed his tune. "There 'tis again, Ham," he bellowed. "It's comin' right at us. You gotta dive now, whether you like it or not."

With that both youngsters went down beneath the waves like bullets. When they came up

again, after what would have seemed an amazingly long time to an onlooker, the boys beheld a strange sight. Fifty feet away they saw the giant fish scudding towards the Surry County shore and in his wake followed Buck Timberlake in close pursuit. The Charles Cityan was actually chasing the sturgeon in the water as a dog chases a rabbit on dry land. But the fish soon showed it had all the best of the race, and the country gawk—who by the way was far from being a gawk in the water—rejoined his companions. “That feesh sure was in a glee of playin’,” coolly remarked Buck as if nothing at all unusual had happened.

All hands by now were far more weary than they were willing to admit and so the trio turned back to land. On reaching the shack (it may readily be guessed that Uncle Ben had taken the boys on his expedition to Dancing Point) the youngsters found the one-legged veteran seated on a soap box contentedly smoking his pipe.

After hearing an account of all that had happened, the ex-Confederate readily agreed with Buck that Ham and Snag had shown the white

feather in the presence of an absolutely harmless, toothless fish. Then abruptly changing the subject, Uncle Ben said, "I wonder what that Gumbo is up to. I sent him down to the spring more than an hour ago for a jug of buttermilk and haven't seen or heard of him since."

As if by magic the darky appeared just at that moment. Ham and Snag, who already were on good terms with this queer specimen of black humanity, immediately began repeating a senseless rhyme which the neighborhood children often sang when they saw the negro. It opened with the words,

"Gumbo, Gumbo-reezer
Stole my mother's
Ice-cream freezer."

Prior to this the negro had always appeared to enjoy this silly doggerel and usually pretended to enter a vigorous denial as to the theft of the ice-cream freezer. But now he maintained a sullen silence and spoke not a word. When Uncle Ben and the boys looked at the man they were astonished to see that his eyes were ablaze with wrath and his features contorted with rage.

“What’s wrong, Gumbo?” queried the veteran. “Your lips are sticking out like two red bananas. Haven’t been drinking again, have you? Where’s my buttermilk?”

“I ain’t got no buttermilk and I doan keer ef I doan nevah git none,” growled Gumbo. “De jug dun bust. I’s mos’ busted myse’f, too,” Then changing his rather insolent tone, he limped up to the ex-Confederate and said, more respectfully, “Cap’n Ben, I ain’t meanin’ ter sass yer, but I gwine home. Thar ain’t no nigger on earth would stand de projickin uv dem dar two lil white boys fum de city.”

“Why, Uncle Gumbo, we didn’t mean anything wrong when we hollered out that poetry about the ice-cream freezer,” said Ham, in a most apologetic tone. “We know you don’t steal, honest we do.”

“I ain’t keerin’ nuthin’ ’bout no ice-cream freezer,” replied Gumbo in a surly tone. “You knows moughty well I ain’t. I’s grumblin’ ’bout dat pizen mean trick you young gempmun’s dun played me. Ain’t you two dun flung me down off’n dat log by whackin’ me wif a plank? Naw,

'twon't no plank, neither, 'twas a piece o' scantlin' wood mos' big as a telegraf pole. Dat ain't no way to treat a healthy nigger, much less a nigger all twis' up with rheumatiks like me. You dun moughty nigh bus' ebry bone in my body."

Ham looked at Snag and Snag looked at Ham, while Uncle Ben looked at both boys. Nobody spoke at first. Then the "Cap'n" said, rather sternly: "Boys, I'll stand for a lot from you, but even down here in Charles City, where negroes are thick as hops, we expect our young people to treat them with respect. One more trick like this and back you both go to Richmond on the next boat."

"But Ham and Snag haven't done anything, Captain," said Buck Timberlake, with a puzzled look on his face. "As we've just told you, we've been in the river and none of us was near the spring."

"I don't know what Gummy's talkin' about," said Ham.

"Me neither," put in Snag.

"Cap'n, 'tain't right fur de likes uv me to call no young white gempmun a liar," replied

Gumbo, "an' dem two lil white pewees fum de city ginerally dun treat me moughty respectful, but I ain't foolin' 'bout dis here bizness. Somebody dun paste me one orful crack wif a piece uv scantlin' wood jes' as I stoop down nigh de spring on a log to fotch dat buttermilk jug. Maybe 'twon't dem thar boys. I ain't axin' nobody ter b'lieve *me*. All you gotta do is ter run down thar to de spring an' see de log an' de busted jug fer yerse'fs. But doan projick 'round thar too long. I gotta have some sperrits of turpenkine or sumpin' on my so' spots. Dey's gittin' angrier ebry minute."

CHAPTER XIII

GUMBO LIFTS THE LID OFF A MONSTER

Although Uncle Ben had a rough way of talking to negroes and appeared to treat them as if they were mere cattle, there was not a colored person in the county who failed to admire and respect him. When he roared out, "Get busy there, you lazy black scoundrel," he could start even the most trifling darkies working with a vim. The secret of his success as a "boss of hands" lay in the fact that he was always fair and reasonable. This the black people, despite their indolence and disposition to shirk, understood perfectly. They knew, too, that the one-legged veteran would go miles to help them in the hour of misfortune.

Chief among the humble adorers of Uncle Ben was Gumbo, the black sheep of Charles City darktown. This mysterious darky, who kept all in continual doubt as to his sanity, had received

many a "cussin' out" from the old soldier, but none, however violent, had shaken his loyalty. Long ago, with his almost uncanny shrewdness, the negro had discovered that Uncle Ben's "cussin' outs" were invariably followed by some unusual act of kindness on his part. The reward in such cases was worth the hot blast that preceded it.

On the night Gumbo claimed to have been knocked off the log, he was severely rebuked by the veteran for his supposed intoxication. Here the negro had good grounds for feeling a sense of injustice. As a matter of fact, he had been painfully hurt, and what in his opinion at least was far worse, he really was not drunk. But Gumbo, who was far from being thin-skinned, took the roasting patiently. He secretly hoped it was going to be followed by a good, stiff drink offered in the form of medicine. In this he was disappointed.

The negro, however, did get a peace offering. Two fine Havana cigars with gorgeous gilt bands were handed him and, to crown it all, a shining new silver dollar was pressed into his palm.

Soothed in this fashion, Gumbo found it impossible to be disagreeable any longer. Then, under the kindly influence of one of the cigars, the negro felt a disposition to talk. Uncle Ben by now had gone to bed, but Buck and the two "lil pe-wees fum de city" were still hanging about. They also felt chatty and were willing to meet the darky halfway.

After very slight persuasion, Gumbo related the story of his adventure at the spring. Though repeatedly informed that no log or other piece of wood had been found at the place of the supposed assault, and that it was impossible for anyone to have been concealed in the shrubbery, the negro stuck stubbornly to his original account. Over and over he insisted the upsetting swat had come just as he stepped on the log to pick up the jug. "An' 'twon't no smooth plank what bus' up agin me, neither," he added, with great feeling.

Seeing that the black man, though inclined to be talkative, intended to throw no more light on the strange affair, Ham ventured into another field of conversation. "Uncle Gummy," he said,

“folks tell us you know all about the Charles City dragon, and that ’twas you that let the thing out of a box.”

“Yassir, I’s de one,” replied the darky complacently. “I let him out.”

“What did he do then?” eagerly inquired all the boys.

“Doan ax me, young gempmun. Wen dat dar draggum poke he head outer a lot ov pinetags and straw in de box an’ look me in de eye, I ain’t said nuffin to him ’less ’twas ‘howdy-do’ and ‘good-bye’ in one bref. Dis nigger jes’ drap he pipe outer he mouf an’ *git*. He run like a skeered rabbit long as dar was eny ground to run on, an’ wen he cum up ’longside de water an’ hadter stop, he jes’ squat down dar in de cat-tails like an’ ole haar an’ stay dar till sunup.”

“Gosh bulldog! that was some running,” said Snag. “You musta got away quick. Seems to me I’d a stayed long enough to risk one eye on the dragon.”

“Ain’t no question ’bout my runnin’, Mister Snag, an’ what I seen in one wink wuz satisfyin’ ernuf fer me. Dat draggum, foh Gawd! was de

uglies'-faced varmint I ever seen heahabouts."

"Hadn't you been seeing skeery sights before this?" inquired Buck. "They tell me you'd been lappin' up whiskey, and that after you'd been tight, you'd talk about meetin' lizards and snakes and frogs and all sorts of creepin' things."

"I ain't sayin' I hadn't had a drap uv bug-juice dat very mornin', an' maybe sum lil nips befo' dat day, but 'tain't no use blamin' de liquor fer de lizards. Why I seen dem wuz kase I'd been conjured. Ef dat thar draggum thing hadn't pop outer dat box an' start me streakin' I wuz gwine see a conjur doctor dat very night."

Ham asked where all these wonderful things had occurred and Gumbo showed no hesitation in replying with great detail. He said that a wooden box, about eleven feet long, three feet wide and two feet deep, had been dumped off the *Ariel* as freight at the wharf near Dancing Point. It arrived about the last of May and was addressed to Daniel Fentress, a planter, whose farm was on the Chickahominy about a mile from the shack where Uncle Ben was camping.

Mr. Fentress also received much other freight — chiefly boxed agricultural implements — by the same boat that day. His eleven-year-old son was at the landing with a team to do the hauling. Gumbo was there to assist the youngster. The two had a tiresome time of it for the freight had to be lifted into the wagon and was heavy. Neither the boy nor the negro, in their hurry, gave the long wooden box much attention beyond noticing that it had several auger holes in it, and that the lid bore the injunction, “This Side Up With Care.”

Several weeks earlier in the spring Mr. Fentress, who was planting an orchard, had received dozens of young fruit trees from a Richmond nursery. Most of these had come wrapped in gunny bagging but a few of the more valuable or more sensitive had been shipped in boxes much like that which Gumbo and the boy handled. What wonder, therefore, that the receptacle escaped their scrutiny.

Mr. Fentress, however, was quick to observe it. After he had had all his freight dumped out in the wagon lot near the barn, he came across the

box. He, too, thought it contained fruit trees, and was indignant that it had been delayed — as he thought — so long in shipping. Seeing Gumbo near at hand, he ordered him to have the box removed a short distance away and carefully opened from the top. Just then the dinner bell rang and all the white folks abandoned their work to eat.

Left entirely alone a few minutes later Gumbo proceeded to tackle the box in accordance with orders. He had removed the entire lid and laid it crosswise over the box before he saw the dragon and the dragon saw him. Then came the darky's hurried flight.

After much questioning — for here the negro appeared to grow cautious — the boys learned that the box from which the monster was alleged to have emerged had been damaged by fire. Gummy tried to make his audience believe the monster, immediately upon sighting him, spat flames. He was a picturesque old liar, this strange black, but here he stretched his bow a little bit too far even for the imaginations of Ham and Snag.

“Come off your perch, Uncle Gummy, and quit yer foolin’ us about the dragon spittin’ fire,” said Ham. “You know perfectly well that if the box was burned, ’twas because you dropped your pipe among the pinetags and dry straw that were in it.”

“Maybe ’twas my pipe what dun it,” admitted Gumbo, “tho’ I sho’ dun seen dat draggum hawk up a whole lot uv flame an’ spit it at me. Mr. Fentress, when he come out pickin’ his toofes aftuh dinner, smell smoke. Den he streak down in de barn lot an’ make for de burnin’ box. Be-fo’ he could squench de flames, mos’ uv de wood wuz burnt an’ de top wuz dat charred up you couldn’t tell what had been writ on it. Praise Gawd, I won’t dar endurin’ uv all dis time. I tells yer wat dey tells me. Mr. Fentress he got so hoppin’ mad he mos’ spit fire hissef. Excusin’ uv de fac’ dat by dat time I wuz a-squat-tin’ in de cattails, he’d-a cussed me black and blue.”

“And where was the dragon?” breathlessly asked Ham, who was all excitement from the story.

“Dar won’t no draggum. He dun got up an’ git long ’fo’ dat. It mought be dat de fire singed he whiskers. Anyhow, it must-a bin hot as fresh mustard on a sore shin in dat box wif dem pine-tags an’ dat straw a-burnin’.”

“What did the thing smell like?” questioned Snag, who had a habit of using his nose in all investigations.

“Mister Snag,” solemnly replied Gumbo, “dat draggum sho’ won’t no bouquet. Gimme a whole passel uv skunks in pref’runce to dat varmint. De draggum one minnit smell like strong musk an’ de next like sumpin daid. Wonder to me turkey buzzards ain’t got him by now.”

“Do you really think he’s still living?” asked Ham.

“He’s livin’ jes’ as sho’ as a gun’s iron,” answered Gumbo, in an awed tone, “an’ what’s mo’, dat draggum’s right down here in dese slashes pokin’ ’round fer vittles. I’s e hearn him uv nights.”

CHAPTER XIV

SOME FOOTPRINTS THAT HAD 'EM GUESSING

Buck Timberlake had plenty of imagination and was more than ready to claim for Charles City anything that might add to the celebrity of that county. But he was unwilling to allow his native land the distinction of having a dragon on the unsupported statement of the black scalawag, Gumbo.

Furthermore, he pooh-poohed the negro's story concerning what had happened at the spring and attributed the yarn entirely to drunkenness. He was a little puzzled, however, to observe that Gumbo showed none of the usual signs of intoxication, and somehow told a remarkably straight tale about letting the monster out of the box.

It was Buck's firm conviction—and he was dreadfully strong in his convictions—that all the talk about the dragon was caused by a sturgeon. Yet granting that Gummy actually had

let something alive out of a box, it certainly could not have been a sturgeon, male or female. People do not ship the big fish, alive or dead, that way. Try as he might, the hard-headed country boy could not altogether dismiss this mysterious business from his mind. It stuck there like a burr.

On the morning following the darky's adventure at the spring, Ham proposed that all hands once more visit the scene to verify their conclusions of the night before and to gather such additional information as was possible. "Things have a way of looking different in daylight," insisted the fat boy, "and I'll bet you a penny whistle we get a clue."

So off they bolted — that is, everybody except Uncle Ben, who had to do some "figurin'" in the shack. Gummy, it was plain, would much have preferred to remain behind, but he was dragged, willy nilly, into the excursion. The negro apparently expected to get another swat on reaching the spring, and he already had more than plenty.

Gummy's surprise was unmistakable when, on

reaching the place of his recent discomfiture, he observed that nothing in any way like a log or a piece of wood was in sight. His attention also was directed to the fact that no thick shrubbery was near at hand.

Contrary to expectations, the darky, noting this, readily admitted that he must have gone wrong the night before when he insisted that he had been assaulted by some person or persons hiding in the vegetation.

“Mos’ eny pusson am liabul ter git sumpin twis’ up wen he fust git ter talkin’ ’bout a ’spe-
rience like dat whar happen las’ night,” said he.
“Gempmun, ’tain’t no use hidin’ it; I wuz
skeered. But sunshine kin moughty nigh put
spunk in a sick rabbit. Dis mornin’ de sand dun
come back in my craw, an’ I knows I wuz wrong
’bout de bushes. Dar won’t no bushes an’ dar
won’t no folks. ’Pears, too, like dar ain’t no lorg,
but here’s de nigger whar got de lick. An’ here’s
de sore spots whar sumpin bus’ into him. I
don’t disrecollick ’bout *dat*. I knows. Now I
axes yer kindly, Mister Buck and Mister Ham
and Mister Snag, doan tell me ain’t nuthin’ hit

me. Lemme keep sumthin ter show fer my mis'ry."

It really had begun to look as if the boys were about to prove Gumbo a liar in everything he said, when all of a sudden Ham yelled out, "My stars, everybody run here quick! I've discovered a footprint in the mud right by the spring. It certainly is curious looking."

Everybody ran, or rather everybody but Buck. He approached with scornful indifference. Gee, that boy was pig-headed!

Yes, Ham was right. There was the distinct impression of five long toes on the soft earth. A moment later a second footprint of the same form and size was detected about ten inches from the first. Anybody could see that this belonged on the other leg of the bird or animal.

"Keep on your shirts and don't get excited, boys," said Buck rather provokingly. "This ain't Robinson Crusoe's island and we don't have any cannibals down here in Charles City." Then he approached nearer, took a look at the footprints and closed his mouth quite unexpectedly.

"We ain't saying they're the footprints of

cannibals," indignantly retorted Ham, "but somethin' made 'em. Now, Smarty, you tell us what did make 'em."

This question seemed to flabbergast Buck. He inched up closer, inspected the impressions in the mud, turned his head first to one side, then to another and bit his lips without at first venturing a reply. Then he said, "Humph, some kind of big waterfowl, I reckon."

"What kind? Why don't you say you don't know? You're just guessing. What makes you think it's a waterfowl? You might jest as well say 'twas a turkey buzzard or that ham-footed old rooster of yours."

"I said 'twas a waterfowl because the prints kinder look like they were left by a web-footed bird," replied Buck rather more humbly now.

"Does any bird have five toes?" demanded Ham of nobody in particular.

Now strange to say, this question proved a knock-out for everyone. Neither Buck nor Snag, to save their lives, could even remember whether their own dearly-beloved roosters, Puddin' and Billy Mahone, had four or five toes. Gumbo, ap-

pealed to as a last resort, showed equal ignorance. "I disrecollick," said he. "'Mongst niggers de bizness part uv a chicken is he laigs — not he feet."

"Well, anyhow," said Ham, "whether birds and fowls have four toes or five, this what-doy-er-call-it must be a whopper. Maybe 'twas an ostrich that biffed Gumbo."

"'Twas a powerful large fowl — no mistake about it — that left that track," confessed Buck thoughtfully.

Just then there came another yell — this time from Snag. "Darn my hide if here ain't some more tracks," he cried, "*and the footprints show only four toes.*"

Everybody rushed to Snag's point of observation and studied the new-found tracks. Yes, the boy was right. There were the additional footprints with the marks of but four toes. They were nearly five feet behind the others and about the same size and shape except for the difference in the number of digits.

"This takes the rag off the bush," grunted Ham, with immense satisfaction, for every min-

ute the mystery was deepening and he did so love a mystery. "Mr. Buck Timberlake," he cried, "now is the time for you to distinguish yourself. What have we here? I ask to know. Are these footprints the marks of a five-toed waterfowl that sheds toes as it walks, or must we infer that there were two fowls—one with five toes and the other with four toes?"

"I dunno," replied Buck rather sullenly. "I ain't no corn doctor that's spent a lifetime studying toes and feet. But I'm certain of this: there ain't no law in Charles City forbiddin' a five-toed bird, big or little, from takin' a drink at a spring with a four-toed bird."

"Reckon the whole layout was made by a big cow sturgeon that came out of the water to graze," sarcastically said Snag, who couldn't resist taking a dig at the country boy. "Guess we'll be milkin' the old cow soon; or does she lay eggs like a waterfowl?"

"You won't be milkin' her if you and Ham act like you did when we seen her last night," witheringly retorted Buck. Then, wishing to keep from starting a quarrel, he changed his tone and

said, "I got a scheme. Why not let Nigger smell them tracks and trail the critter — birds, I mean — like a setter following partridges?"

Nobody had thought of this. It was a capital plan. There was only one trouble about the suggestion. Nigger was not a bird dog and didn't pretend to be. He never bragged about the feats of his nose. Beyond using it for an occasional sniff at other dogs, or for following Ham and Snag, he hardly knew he had such an organ.

Nevertheless when led up to the footprints, the Newfoundland did condescend to take a smell at them. Then he decided that the whole affair was some sort of a joke and started to romp. To his surprise he suddenly found himself grabbed by all three boys and dragged to a second set of footprints. Worse still, his moist black nose was actually jammed down into these.

By force of such treatment Nigger was brought to realize that something serious was expected of him. Gradually it soaked into his head that his friends were asking him to follow a trail. Hence he gave a friendly little sniff and a cough, stirred up a tiny cloud of dust with his nose and

got right down to his new line of business. Nor did it seem to come hard to him.

The spring was not more than fifty yards from a small arm of the Chickahominy, which, as has been explained, empties its waters into the James at Dancing Point. Towards this arm of the Chickahominy Nigger, nose to the ground and tail straight out like a bird dog, was pretty soon moving at a good gait. Now and then he would pause and give an exultant sniff as if very proud of his new accomplishment.

After the Newfoundland had gone about thirty feet more footprints were discovered and, Oh, joy! it could be seen that the five-toed tracks alternated regularly with the four-toed tracks.

Again and again the trail would be lost in the canebrakes and marsh grasses, to be found once more by Nigger, and always there was the same alternation of five and four toed impressions. Finally the footprints disappeared at the water.

“A blind man could see that these tracks were left by some four-footed animal and not by a bird,” declared Ham. “Even a stubborn mule like Buck will admit that.”

“I ain’t admittin’ nothin’,” growled Buck, “except that I was mighty nigh right in the beginning. The critter, whatever it is, belongs in the water jest as I said.”

“Still harpin’ about that old cow sturgeon,” wrathfully exclaimed Ham. “Well, let him call it a sturgeon if ’twill ease his mind, but I’ve got another name for the thing. It’s the dragon of Dancin’ Point, and it’s got five toes on its front legs and four on its back legs.”

CHAPTER XV

WHAT BECAME OF THOSE FLORIDA TURTLES?

“I’m daggone sick and tired of hearin’ you two chew the rag about them footprints. There ain’t been nuthin’ else for two days.”

The peevish individual who spouted this remark was Snag Perkins. He had good grounds for complaint, too. Ever since Ham and Buck had seen the tracks at the spring, they had talked of nothing else. Snag also had felt some interest at first, but soon got fed up on idle speculations.

“Enough of a thing is enough,” said he, “and I ain’t no hog. I know when I’ve got enough. I wouldn’t give one good rooster fight for all this here imitation detective business and sniffin’ around with dorgs. Let’s eat. Here comes Gummy with the grub.”

But neither the boys nor Uncle Ben were to eat just then. Even as they inhaled the odor of the food, a stupendous crash, accompanied by a

terrific rattling of tin plates, fell upon their ears. Gumbo had dropped the waiter containing part of the meal and gone dashing out of the back door like a streak of greased lightning.

Simultaneously another door had opened and a huge, red-faced man, carrying a shotgun, had entered.

“Well, if here ain’t old Dan Fentress,” exclaimed Uncle Ben, apparently oblivious of what had happened to his dinner. “Hand us your paw, Dan, and gimme a chew of tobacco. Left mine in an ole coat hangin’ down on the fence.”

Mr. Fentress grinned, produced his plug of mild burley, said howdy-do to everybody present and hurled his mighty bulk into a chair. He was far from being the ferocious person he looked.

“Ben,” said he, “we’ll talk business a little later after sittin’ around some and chawin’. Did you see that durn Gumbo dart off when he sighted me? He thinks I’m going to kill him; and I ought to. Reckon he imagined his time had come when he glimpsed this gun that I generally tote around to shoot crows with.”

“What you got against Gumbo, Dan?” asked

the veteran. "He's a pretty good sort of darky when he lets whiskey alone, though he ain't goin' to kill himself working."

"Oh, you ought to know the story," said Mr. Fentress. "If you don't you're the only man in Charles City who hasn't heard it. The dod-blasted scoundrel burnt up some freight of mine by dropping his nasty stinking old pipe in a pile of dry packing. Might have set everything on my place afire. But instead of stoppin' to help when the blaze started, he lit out and took to the high grass."

It would have done anybody good to look at Ham and Buck as they heard this. Their eyes fairly danced with delight. Even Snag sat up and took notice, despite his contempt for amateur detective work. Here at last was the one man who knew more than anybody else about the Charles City dragon—yes, actually the man to whom the box containing the monster had been sent.

"Please, please tell us the story, Mr. Fentress," pleaded Ham. "We've heard so much of that box and the dragon that popped out of it."

"Dragon! did you say?" repeated the big man; and he went into convulsions of laughter. "I swear somebody ought to hang that lying Gumbo. So he told you 'twas a dragon, did he — the durned rascal!"

"Yassir, he said 'twas a dragon," replied Ham humbly, for out of the corner of his eye he could see Buck and Snag grinning.

"Well, sir, if that ain't enough to make a dog strike his father," chortled Mr. Fentress. "A dragon — just think of it, a dragon!"

Here it looked as if Mr. Fentress were about to throw a convulsion fit. He shook so with mirth that he almost fell out of his clothes.

Poor Ham! For his part he nearly shrank up with shame. Every time he tried to open his mouth to speak, the man would begin to roar and bawl out, "A dragon, did you say?" "Can you beat that?" "Of all the liars!" "To think that Gumbo's been tellin' people a tale like that."

But finally Mr. Fentress wore himself out with his own sense of humor and began to talk like a normal human being. "Boys," he said, "I'm sorry to disappoint you. It's a pity Gumbo's

yarn ain't the truth. It ought to be preserved in alcohol. But much as I hate to do it, I'm bound to say I don't think there was any dragon. When I got back to the barn lot the box, as well as its lid and contents, had been nearly consumed. All I could make out were the words: "This Side Up With Care" on the top. The box had been partly filled with a dry straw bedding which burned rapidly. At first I thought it contained fruit trees but in this I was plainly wrong."

"What did it contain?" abruptly asked Snag, who thought the story was going too slow.

"That's what puzzled me, and in a way still puzzles me," replied Mr. Fentress. "The next day I drove down to the landing and asked the freight agent. There's where I got another jolt. He spoke right up and said, 'I can tell you in a minute. That box was expressed from Florida — made a quick trip, too — and when I received it, 'twas marked: **LIVE TURTLES; HANDLE WITH CARE.**'"

At this information all three boys seemed to shrivel up like punctured toy balloons. Not a

one of them had the gumption to think about turtles while seeking to solve the problem of the footprints. Worse still, each knew he *ought* to have thought about them, for turtles, big and little, were no unfamiliar sight to any of the three.

“Why in the name of high heaven,” continued Mr. Fentress, not noting the effect of his remarks upon the boys, “anybody should let loose and send me a box of live turtles from Florida I don’t see. So far as I can remember, I don’t know a soul in Florida. And I can get all the turtles I want right here in these waters. I’ve received no explanation, whatsoever.

“Another thing also has got me guessing. Where are the turtles that were in the box? There wasn’t a sign of them, dead or alive, when I reached the scene. Now you all know that turtles ain’t much for speed. How they could have climbed out of that box and made off I don’t see. On the other hand, Gummy couldn’t have stolen them — leastwise not all of them. Yet if they didn’t make off and if Gummy didn’t steal ’em, they ought to have been burned alive. But the

funny part about it all is that I haven't seen so much as a sign of roast turtle — shell or anything — yet you could bet your last dollar that a big turtle wouldn't be entirely consumed by fire in less than an hour. Now, gentlemen, what do you think of my story? ”

“ I think,” solemnly replied Uncle Ben, with a twinkle in his eye, “ that you're a bigger liar than Gumbo. You can give him cards and spades and beat him at his own game. But here's the darky himself. We'll have a lying match right here on the spot.”

Gumbo, through some sort of deadly fascination which makes all of us court dangers we fear, had slunk back into the room while Mr. Fentress told of the turtles. Perhaps he had been shrewd enough to conclude from the farmer's uproarious laughter that nothing was to be feared from him. At any rate, there he was with a conciliatory grin on his face.

Of course Mr. Fentress, in his good-natured way, at first threatened to murder the negro on the spot and even pretended to reach for his gun. But after a little funning of this sort, he ordered

the darky to give an exact account of his adventure with the box.

Though told about the turtles and urged to stick to the truth, Gumbo stoutly held his original ground. Nothing could shake him in his contention that he had let loose a "draggum." The interview, therefore, resulted only in making things far more tangled than they were before.

"That darky will lie 'till doomsday," said Buck a little later when Uncle Ben and Mr. Fentress had retired to talk over some timber.

"By the way, how many toes has a turtle?" asked Ham.

Nobody answered.

CHAPTER XVI

BLOOD FLOWS ON CHICKAHOMINY'S SHORES

Did you know that some dogs, when in a sufficiently good humor, can smile? Of course the snub-nosed kind with drooping chops like pugs and bulls and Boston terriers can't, but take a long-faced pup like Nigger and watch him when everything is going well. He's mighty apt to be caught grinning. Anyhow, Ham Willingham's Newfoundland was smiling on the bright July morning of which we write.

It was some days after the visit of Dan Fentress, when everybody's pet theories about the dragon had been knocked skyhigh by the story concerning the turtles. The fields and swamps were shimmering with the heat, for Charles City was suffering from a long dry spell. Gumbo, who was full of superstitions about the signs of nature, had just killed a five-foot black snake and hung it on the fence. He said this would

bring on rain. Inasmuch as snakes often come out of their hiding places just before showers, the negro may not have been altogether wrong in his attempt to "fix" the weather.

But it didn't make any difference to the boys whether it rained or shone. They were off for a lark in the open. All they wanted to do was to mosey and lazy around. If it grew unbearably hot they could take to the water, for their path wound in and out among the many little tributaries of the Chickahominy.

Somewhere in this region, nearly three hundred years before, the Indians under King Powhatan had captured another adventurer, Captain John Smith, and it would have gone hard with that investigative gentleman but for a certain lovely Indian maiden. Ham and Snag, however, were not bothering about this historic incident — possibly they didn't even remember it — though Buck, the Charles City booster, knew all about the affair.

After the trio of youngsters had gone about half a mile and had paused at least ten times to witness Snag's exploits with his gravel-shooter,

a halt was made under a swamp oak. Nigger glanced up inquiringly at his master with a sort of what-next look on his face. Then he gave a short bark and loped off towards the water, some fifty feet away. Nobody followed. The dog repeated the performance, with the same results. Then, as if disappointed, the Newfoundland began to bark loudly.

“What’s that pup growlin’ about?” asked Snag.

“He ain’t growlin’,” indignantly retorted Ham, who resented any remark implying that Nigger, under any stress, could lose his temper. “He’s simply askin’ us to take a swim with him.”

“Nuthin’ doin’,” said Snag. “Dorg or no dorg, I ain’t goin’ to git in that river and have my hide blistered by the sun. We’d be peelin’ like onions tomorrow.”

“Right you are,” replied Buck.

As a result of this turn-down, which he seemed thoroughly to understand, the Newfoundland trotted off alone for his bath. With a joyous plunge he struck out towards midstream. Once

or twice he looked back with that same contented smile on his face, and seemed to say, "Come in, boys, the water's fine." Then, receiving no response, he went ahead with a reproachful splash.

"He sure can swim," proudly said Ham; "I don't believe nuthin' could drownd that dog."

Hardly were these words out of his mouth when Nigger was seen to wheel suddenly around and start shoreward at a speed that was astonishing.

"Look at him now!" cried Ham. "Ain't he wonderful? B'lieve he heard my compliment and is coming back to thank me."

Far from it. At that instant Nigger gave a dismal howl which bore a horrifying message of agony and terror. Then the waters gurgled over his head and he went under.

"Lord have mercy on us," screamed Ham, in genuine fright; "sumthin's gone wrong. Nigger's drowndin' and is callin' for help."

With that he dashed down towards the water with his two companions behind him. Before they had gone half way they saw the dog rise some ten feet out of the straight course and

again make for shore. Now he was desperately swimming in a sort of zig-zag fashion which showed the animal had almost every muscle of his body in full play.

"We're comin'. Don't lose yer grit, Nigger. We're comin'," shrieked Ham, as he plunged wildly into the river without a second's hesitation.

Buck and Snag, not at all knowing what they were saying, bawled equally as loudly and plunged with the same disregard of danger into the water.

Thirty feet from the shore Ham and Nigger met, that is to say, the Newfoundland was then within arm's reach of his master. The boy "let down" to ascertain the depth of the water. It came only to his shoulders, so he thrust out a hand and grabbed Nigger.

To his assistance pantingly swam Buck and Snag. The three, despite their wet clothing, the muddy bottom beneath their feet and the weight of the animal, soon had the Newfoundland on dry land.

Then they saw a sight which sickened their

very souls and sent Ham keeling over in a dead faint. The dog's left hind foot had been lacerated beyond description and shreds of raw flesh were hanging from the upper part of the leg. To add to the confusion, blood was spurting in torrents.

At first it looked as if all was over with Nigger. He lay motionless where the boys had placed him, still breathing hard from his tremendous exertions but too feeble to move head or limbs. What could be done? It was a trying situation. There lay Ham all knocked out, and by him the fearfully mutilated dog whose sufferings would have touched a heart of stone, although he gave no whine of complaint.

Fortunately Buck and Snag were boys who knew how to face situations. Buck immediately began some first-aid work on Nigger, and Snag was equally as quick to throw cold water in the face of Ham.

That youngster, be it said, was not slow to revive. Too much was happening for him to stay long out of the game. Though pale as a ghost and dreadfully sick in his stomach, he

insisted on struggling to his feet and going to the side of his dog.

“Don’t die, Nigger; please don’t die,” he pleaded. “If you live I’ll git you a tag the first day I hit Richmond, even if I have to starve to do it.”

Flop. Flop. Flop. There came a faint sound from the earth near Ham’s feet. It was Nigger’s bushy tail, now smeared with blood. He was doing the best he could to express gratitude and appreciation—affectionate and loving to the last. But the wagging soon ceased altogether, and the animal, with a little sigh, relaxed and lay perfectly motionless.

Ham began to weep as though his heart were breaking. Now he didn’t care who saw him blubbering—in fact he tried to make as much noise as possible. He really wanted to howl.

“Quit it,” said Snag, awfully uncomfortable and trying to pretend that he was very stern. “Quit it, I say. He wasn’t nuthin’ but a animal, nohow. If there’s a dog heaven you can bet yer life he’s trottin’ down its golden streets this very minute.”

"But he ain't dead yet," interrupted Buck, who strove to talk positively like a regular doctor, and who, at heart, was quite proud of the first-aid work he had done. "I've seen a lot of dorgs git all chawed up, but I don't count none of 'em really dead till I see 'em actually made up into sausage."

This comforting assurance didn't seem to help Ham much, but it gave Snag an idea. "What bit him?" asked the owner of the silver duck-wing in his usual brusque way.

Nobody could say, but now that the excitement was partly over, all the boys had a faint recollection of having seen something poke up out of the water just as Nigger turned towards the shore. Snag also was of the opinion that he had observed part of a big fish. He even went so far as to insist that when Ham and his companions jumped into the water, this fish—or "feesh," as he called it—was pursuing the dog but immediately turned off and darted in another direction.

"Maybe 'twas a shark, or more likely, a big turtle," ventured Ham, "though I can't help

thinkin' 'twas the Charles City dragon. If it wasn't for the fact that Nigger got bit in the water, I'd know 'twas the dragon."

"I'll bet good money 'twas a sturgeon," piped Buck, though he spoke rather feebly.

"There it is again — that old cow sturgeon," stormed Snag. "We'll never hear the end of her. If we were to lead Buck up to a circus cage containin' a lion and he heard the animal roar, he'd still swear 'twas a sturgeon. Over and over again he's told us that these feesh ain't got any teeth, and now when he sees a dorg all torn to ribbons, he flops right over and says a sturgeon nipped him."

The same old argument, perhaps, would have been continued indefinitely had not Buck adroitly changed the subject by suggesting that the boys make a litter on which to carry Nigger back to the shack. Everybody was willing to lend a hand to this work, and two hours later the dog, still helpless, was lying motionless and barely alive on a comfortable bed of straw in an out-house.

Ham had another spell of weeping when the

morning's experiences were related to Uncle Ben. The old soldier, however, was gentle and comforting as only he knew how to be. He admitted that he was entirely at a loss to know what had attacked Nigger.

"You mustn't give way too much, Ham," he said, "though I ain't sayin' that a little cryin' ain't good for all of us now and then. But remember, boy, you're the son of a gallant soldier, and it doesn't do to show too much weakness. I've seen far worse sights than what you saw today. I've seen hundreds of men so mangled on the field of battle that you could hardly tell they were human beings. There ain't much chance for your dog. I might as well tell you that at the start, but we'll get a veterinarian and do what can be done for him.

"It's as plain as your nose on your face that even if Nigger don't kick the bucket, he's got to lose part of that injured leg. Most likely it'll have to be sawed off at the first joint. But what of it? Even after that he'll have two more legs than I've got; and besides, the vet can give him chloroform for the operation. When that Con-

federate sawbones trimmed me up, I didn't even get a smell of chloroform, so even today I could write a whole book on sufferin'."

The kindly old soldier beamed cheerily on the boy, who soon dried his tears.

CHAPTER XVII

COMFORT FOUND IN A BLACK FOOT

It was nearly a week before Nigger showed any signs which indicated that he did not intend to go to dog heaven that summer, and Oh! the changes that took place in that distressing interval.

The maimed Newfoundland, as soon as possible, was taken back by boat to Heron's Nest, where he received the attentions of a veterinarian. This man of science confirmed Uncle Ben's prediction that "a little surgery" would be necessary.

One bright morning when all the world seemed gay, Uncle Ben winked significantly at Snag while the family sat at breakfast. Snag, in recognition of this signal, solemnly returned the wink. Nobody else saw this by-play, nor did anyone save the peg-leg veteran notice that immediately after the meal, Snag literally dragged

Ham off for a walk to the steamboat landing.

This expedition consumed three hours, for Jefferson Davis Perkins stopped almost every one hundred feet to take a shot at something or other with his gravel-shooter. Upon their return Uncle Ben met the youngsters at the gate with a serious look on his face.

Ham at once became suspicious. All that morning he had noticed how queerly Snag had been acting. "What's up?" he anxiously inquired. "I know you're keepin' sumthin' from me."

"Nothing wrong; nothing wrong at all," replied Uncle Ben with a noticeable gulp in his throat. "I've just come to tell you that Nigger's a lot better, but—er, he mustn't be disturbed just now. It's this-a-way: Nigger admired my wooden leg so much that he decided to have one for himself. The vet. cut off his paw while you two were gone. He's doin' fine—that dog. But gosh! it took a lot of chloroform to put him out of business. He kept waggin' his tail all the time up to the very minute he dropped off to sleep."

"And you knew this was goin' on and didn't tell me!" screamed Ham, as he turned on Snag in a fury.

"'Twas yer Uncle Ben that put me up to leadin' yer off," said Snag. "Both of us thought 'twould be a heap better for you not to be on hand durin' the cuttin', though I'd like to have seen it. Nigger's doin' fine and he's still got three legs left. Seems to me you oughter be mighty proud of that pup. Any boy can have a four-legged dorg, but it's blessed few of 'em that can show a three-legged dorg, or one with a wooden leg."

"I hadn't thought of that, Snag," said Ham, much consoled, "and I reckon I did speak ugly to you just now. But somehow I felt that Nigger would think hard of me for not sticking by him when he was in trouble."

"Think hard of you nuthin'—not that dog. You're the sentimentalest thing I ever seen. You oughter be a gal."

Snag got in a powerful stroke that time. He had said the one thing best calculated to make Ham hold back his tears. Not wishing to be

cruel, however, the owner of Billy Mahone added, " 'Tis hard, I know, but this ain't no time to be gittin' cold feet. There's a lot we gotta do. If that dorg had died I'd made up my mind to let you go in partners with me on my silver duck-wing, but 'tain't necessary now. What we gotta do is to git a preserve jar, fill it full of alcohol and put ole Nigger's paw in it—the one that's been sawed off. You'll want to keep that always. Reckon your Ma will ask you to let her set it on the mantel-piece in the parlor along with them shells and that vase full of dried grasses. The Doc. promised beforehand that he'd save the paw for us."

Here again Ham found immense consolation. He had never once thought of preserving that mangled black paw until Snag's fertile brain suggested it. The thing would be a treasure. Other boys would pay money to see it. Then, too, as has been said, there wasn't another boy in Richmond, or Charles City, either, for that matter, who had a three-legged Newfoundland. Better still was the baffling mystery surrounding the dog's misfortune. Scores of other urchins,

like Snag, would ask "What bit him?" and then would come an opportunity to tell all about the marvelous things that were happening in that time-honored county.

It will thus be seen that when it came to offering consolation of the genuinely helpful sort, Mr. Jefferson Davis Perkins, though not always given to pretty speeches, took the championship belt of the world.

Just what good old Nigger might have thought of all this nobody can guess. There's reason to believe, however, that he was enough of a sport to have approved of everything Snag suggested. The dog had true Newfoundland courage.

Late that afternoon Ham and his comforter were allowed to pay a visit to the dog. The animal rested comfortably on a bed of straw in one of the stalls of the Heron's Nest stables, and though pitifully emaciated and feeble, was happy to see his friends. All bandaged up as he was, he couldn't do much fancy tail-wagging, but he nevertheless showed many signs of appreciation. When Ham laid his tear-stained face up against that of the dog, Nigger was only too glad to lick

it, dirt and all, to show that he intended to be game to the last.

Of course Nigger finally got well. He was too decent a dog to die and mess up a nice summer with a tragedy like that. But although he may have admired Uncle Ben's wooden limb, he showed no disposition to drag around with a peg leg himself. Snag and Ham tried in vain to make him wear the section of hickory axe-helve which they had fashioned into an artificial leg, but there was nothing doing. Nigger kicked out of traces at this scheme. Furthermore he showed the world that a dog, by the exercise of a little ingenuity, can hop around pretty lively on three limbs.

But all this is going ahead of our story, just as it is when we reveal that it yet remains to be shown how the Newfoundland's injury, indirectly at least, was the means of saving certain people hundreds of dollars. Let us stick to the present; that is to say, let us accompany Ham and Snag after they left Nigger following that first visit of sympathy.

Straightway they went to a certain corner of the stable, where they found something black all wrapped in linen and smelling of antiseptics. It was Nigger's amputated paw. With this safely deposited in Snag's pocket, they proceeded to the pantry of the manor house, where they encountered Cousins Millie and Betty Lou. Of these good spinsters they demanded an empty preserve jar. The ladies reported that no jars were available, since all were filled with jam of one sort or the other.

"So much the better," said Ham, "we can get the jar empty by eatin' what's in it"; and this is what they did.

Then, last of all, Nigger's friends, armed with the empty jar and the amputated paw, proceeded to the cellar. There they unearthed a huge, wicker-covered bottle known in Virginia as a "demijohn." From this they procured an alcoholic fluid of an amber tint. Cousins Millie and Betty Lou knew nothing of the existence of this big bottle. But Uncle Ben did. It contained corn whiskey. The veteran said he occasionally

drank it for his health, which must have been bad, since the demijohn held a gallon.

Thus it was that Nigger's foot came to be preserved even unto this day, a treasure to be exhibited to admiring friends.

CHAPTER XVIII

SECRETS OVERHEARD IN THE STABLE

Was there ever a boy who didn't like to hang about a stable? Ham and Snag certainly were not exceptions to this general rule. Indeed, they felt far more comfortable under the roof which sheltered the horses and mules of Heron's Nest plantation than they did in the presence of Cousins Millie and Betty Lou, who often picked on them when they failed to observe the rules of cleanliness. Then, too, Uncle Ben, always the most entertaining of companions, used to hang about the stable a good deal himself. He kept there a thoroughbred colt which he loved almost as Ham loved his dog or Snag loved his rooster.

During Nigger's somewhat tedious convalescence (it took him nearly three weeks to get back on his remaining three feet) Ham frequented the stable more than ever.

One morning when everything seemed to be

going particularly well with the animal, Ham stretched himself out beside the dog for a good, quiet think. Soon, in spite of everything he could do, the boy began to feel drowsy. Snag was off somewhere with his gravel-shooter and the place was unusually quiet. Stupefied by the warm air and soothed by the smell of the hay, the youngster drowsed off before he knew what was happening and so did Nigger.

The two must have slept half an hour when the door opened and Uncle Ben walked in with a stranger. Ham and the dog awoke at the interruption, but each felt too lazy to stir, nor did the boy think it necessary even to make his presence known.

"It's hot outside," said Uncle Ben to his companion, "and this is as good a place as any for a talk, though I don't want to seem discourteous. Would you rather go to the house?"

"We're all right as we are," replied the stranger. "Couldn't be in a better place, to tell the truth, for I'd prefer not to be interrupted."

"Go ahead, then," said the veteran rather shortly. "As I take it, John Teaford, this is a

case where you're to do the talkin' and I the listenin'. You know what I think of you."

"Yes, I know what you think of me," said the person addressed as Teaford, "and I'm sorry your opinion is no better, but I rather imagine you'll be interested in my remarks. I've come here to tell you about Gideon Morganfield."

"That infernal scoundrel!" exclaimed Uncle Ben, losing control of himself and speaking in a tone Ham never had heard him use before. "Well, don't attempt to say anything good of him to me."

"Never fear," replied Teaford. "You used the right word when you said 'scoundrel.' They tell us birds of a feather flock together. I admit that I've wasted a good part of my life hanging around Gid Morganfield. But all that's over and done with now. Going down to Norfolk on the *Ariel* June 21 with that crook, we two got to drinking and nearly came to blows. In fact, if I'd a had my way there would have been a fight but outside parties interfered."

These words had scarcely reached Ham's ears before he realized, all in a flash, that this John

Teaford, talking to Uncle Ben, was the same individual who had quarreled with the bow-legged person he called a "resurrectionist." Then a terrifying thought flew into Ham's mind. Perhaps Teaford was a detective. Maybe he had come to arrest Snag and himself for their connection with the grave robbery. Evidently the fellow had a way of finding out everything. Hadn't he threatened to expose the bow-legged man and shown that he knew all about that rascal's doings? Now he would tell Uncle Ben about the bloody handkerchief and the keyhole saw. Small wonder that Ham immediately resolved to lay low and keep his presence unknown.

"No matter about the fuss you had," abruptly said the veteran. "Get right down to brass tacks and tell me what you're here for."

"Now don't be too rough on me, Captain," whined Teaford. "Everybody wants to kick a down dog. I'm trying to get up so I can live decently. You ain't helping to make it easy. I'm not after money. I want to get something off my conscience. It's about that affair of Major Hamilton Willingham's — those lost bonds."

Major Hamilton Willingham was Ham's dead father. Though a distinguished soldier and an able lawyer in his day, people said he had died under a cloud, though the son, fortunately, had been shielded from these ugly reports.

"Go ahead, Teaford," said Uncle Ben, just a trifle less harshly. "I want to be fair, and after all, most of your vile deeds were probably done under the influence of Gid Morganfield. If you really intend to walk straight now, I'll be the last man in the world to block your way."

"Captain," replied Teaford, "as I've said, Gid and I have fallen out. He's played me some dirty tricks recently. I could ruin him if I told all I knew. Guess he could hurt me, too, if he told all he knew. In any event, I don't intend to do any blabbing. Here's all I've got to say—I believe Gid Morganfield has got those bonds which people think Major Willingham made away with. You couldn't prove it and I couldn't prove it, but I've heard and seen enough to know I'm right about this."

"I know you're right about it, too," said Uncle Ben, "and I've known it for years, but

that doesn't help a bit in a court of law."

"It's a shame for the memory of a man like Major Willingham to have a stain on it," continued Teaford, "and it's an outrage for a fine woman like his widow to suffer as she has done and to have to struggle so hard to make both ends meet. Honest, I want to help set this business straight."

"How do you propose to do it?"

"That's what worries me. It isn't easy. I don't intend to turn state's evidence even on a man like Gideon Morganfield, though we're quits forever. The good turns he once did me will keep my mouth shut. But I came here to say this: You're to receive a visit from him shortly. Morganfield is going to tell you he believes he can recover those bonds if you pay him two thousand dollars. Of course, he's going to pretend some other fellow has them, and that he isn't actually certain he can land them under any circumstances. But as a matter of fact, he can. I'll be fair enough to say, too, that if you give him the amount mentioned, he's more than likely to produce the securities. You can trust him to

that extent since he's afraid to attempt selling the bonds."

"In other words," interrupted Uncle Ben, "he's to come to me with a sort of blackmailing proposition. If he does I'll break his neck."

"Call it what you want, but keep your head, Captain," replied Teaford. "My advice is that you see Morganfield and listen to what he says. Here's my suggestion: The man's as crooked as a ram's horn, in addition to being a professional gambler. I give you this tip. Get the police to hunt up his record, or lots better still, employ a detective. Then when he appears, confront him with his crimes, put up a stiff bluff and tell him that unless he produces the bonds, without a penny of compensation, you'll have him slammed into jail."

"A nice sort of business, that," sneered Uncle Ben. "I'm no detective to go around huntin' up things on people. Neither would I keep quiet about a man's crimes to force him to do something I wanted. That's a kind of blackmail, too. But I tell you this—I hope to clear Hamilton Willingham's name some day, and though I

don't know how I'm going to do it, I sort of feel in my bones that sooner or later I'll succeed. On second thoughts I believe I'll take your advice and see Gid Morganfield when he comes, though it'll be hard for me to keep my hands off him."

"Don't get too peppery when he appears," said Teaford, "and on the other hand, don't be too refined in your methods about driving a bargain. You're to deal with a slippery rascal who will outwit you unless you keep your eyes wide open. Above all things don't mention the fact that I've been here. It might cost me my life."

Uncle Ben promised to use discretion, though he was still a little uncertain as to how he would meet the situation. Shortly afterward Teaford left.

For some reason or other which he himself could not explain, Ham did not tell Uncle Ben that he had overheard the entire conversation in the stable. Neither did the veteran say anything about it, nor did he mention, two days later, that he had received a letter from Gideon Morganfield in which that knave announced a purpose to visit Heron's Nest.

CHAPTER XIX

WHY THE VETERAN HATED MORGANFIELD

Although Ham did not think it was wise just at that time to inform Uncle Ben that he had heard the conversation in the stable, he was not so secretive with Snag. In fact, the owner of the silver duckwing had hardly returned from his gravel-shooter hunt before Ham began pouring the story into his ears. Snag was the kind of boy to whom one liked to tell things. He was always sympathetic and interested and could offer advice like grown folks. In this instance he gave even more attention than usual to the words of his friend, nor did he interrupt at all save when he grunted with surprise or scratched at the chiggers on his bare legs.

“What ought I to do?” asked Ham, when he came to the end of his story. “I don’t understand any more than a rabbit about bonds and suchlike, and I haven’t got the slightest idea

why Uncle Ben hates that 'resurrectionist,' Morganfield, so. But the thing that bothers me most of all is the way they talked about my dad. What did they mean by saying that people think he 'made away' with the bonds? "

Snag, without having much more knowledge of business than Ham, knew all too well what this meant. Like so many others, he had heard vague rumors about Major Willingham, though he had never breathed a word of them to his chum. Now he was confronted with a direct question bearing on the matter. He immediately decided he would neither lie nor tell the truth. He would simply dodge the question.

"I dunno what bonds are," he replied, and then, after spitting through his teeth to prove he wasn't embarrassed, he added, "B'lieve they're something like money—almost as good, anyhow. If I was in your place I'd ask Uncle Ben what bonds are; and I think I'd also ask him to tell me all about my Pa—that is, your Pa."

It will thus be seen that foxy Snag, to save himself the pain of hurting his friend, shoved

the disagreeable duty off on Uncle Ben, or, as boys say nowadays, "passed the buck" to Uncle Ben. Moreover, instinct told the wise youngster that some older head than himself should handle this delicate matter.

"Must I tell Uncle Ben about our lettin' loose them dorgs and about the grave robbery?" asked Ham.

"Well, I dunno. Maybe he wouldn't understand and might fly the handle. Suppose we lay low and keep quiet about that a little longer. I ain't sayin' as we oughtn't tell him sometime, but I reckon it can wait. Let's moon over it between now and the time Morganfield gits here."

"Did we do so very wrong rescuin' Nigger and turnin' loose that lowdown parcel of curs?" queried Ham.

"I don't think so and you don't think so, but that don't mean that the poundmaster and the police are of our way of thinking. Yet the newspaper says as plain as daylight that everybody took it as a joke and was tickled to death about it."

“Then if nobody ain’t mad about the dorgs why should anybody be sore because we afterwards ran off to the buryin’-ground and saw a lot of grave-robbers?” inquired Ham, with more logic than grammar. “We certainly didn’t mean to see ’em, and we certainly didn’t have no gay time when we did see ’em.”

“Folks is curious,” said Snag. “They’ll git off their gazippe ’bout one thing and then swallow sumthin’ a heap worse like ’twas pie. I say you’d better go slow. Suppose you kinder feel out Uncle Ben a little. First ask him about bonds and then, sorter careless like, ask him about — your father.”

It wasn’t many hours after this before Ham screwed up the courage to approach his kinsman. “Uncle Ben,” he said, without beating about the bush, “I want you to tell me about my Dad — all about him.”

The unexpected question startled the old soldier. He grew fidgety and for a minute made no reply. Then he slowly answered, “It’s a sad story, Ham, and I hate to relate it. Hasn’t your mother told you all you need to know?”

“ Ma has tried to tell me over and over again, but she always breaks down and cries, and that hurts me so. I’d rather have a man tell me so I won’t cry, too.”

“ Well,” said Uncle Ben, as he wiped a suspiciously moist eye, “ I can tell you ’most everything in a few words. You know your father was drowned off the coast of North Carolina in a storm while goin’ by boat to Savannah. He was one of the bravest soldiers that ever lived, and a crackin’ good lawyer, too. He went to his reward when you were only a little chap of five. There wasn’t an honest or more upright man in Virginia, or in the whole world for that matter.”

“ Did everybody think as you do about him? ” interrupted Ham. “ I mean, did everybody think he was honest and upright? ”

“ Yes, everybody — that is, everybody who knew him as I did,” evasively answered the old soldier, much confused.

“ But aren’t there people who say hard things about him, Uncle Ben, even if you and I don’t believe them? Please don’t keep anything back;

I gotta know one time or the other. Ma always weeps so I can't git heads nor tails outer what she says. You go ahead and tell no matter how bad it hurts me."

Uncle Ben turned red in the face. Then he began to hem and haw and to look thoroughly miserable. But Ham kept a steady eye on him, and the veteran saw that the boy was determined to carry his point.

Finally the old soldier yielded. "Maybe it's just as well that I do tell you," he said, gently, "seein' that I loved your father and love you so well. You've got to hear it sooner or later, and it's best for it to come from a friend. The story is not easy for a boy to grasp, but I'll try to make it plain."

"I reckon I can understand somehow," replied Ham, "it's about some bonds, ain't it?"

"Yes, that's it. As I've said, your father was a lawyer. About two months before his death a large estate was put into his hands; I mean, he was intrusted with a lot of property belongin' to a rich man who had died. Your father was what they call executor of the estate — had to manage

it generally, pay all the bills owed by the dead man and collect all the money due him. Among the things that came into his hands were \$20,000 worth of coupon bonds."

"Here's where I am stupid," said Ham. "What are bonds?"

"Well, if I were to give you the legal definition you'd understand less than you do now. For our purpose it is only necessary to say that bonds are somewhat like money. Suppose a new railroad is about to be built and money is needed to start the work. Well-to-do people lend the company cash and the company gives these people its bonds—that is, its promise under seal to pay back the money with interest for the loan."

"I kinder get a glimmer now, but what about those outlandish things called 'coupons'?"

"Let's do some more supposin'," said Uncle Ben. "Let's suppose you lent the railroad company \$20,000 for thirty years. In return the company would promise not only to pay the \$20,000 back at the end of that time, but to give you a certain amount of interest—say six per cent—every year. Coupons are the slips attached to

the bonds which call for interest. On a thirty-year bond there are sixty slips, one for each six months. As each half year's interest falls due, you cut off a slip (or coupon) for that particular period, take it to a bank and get cash for it. Understand? You draw your interest every six months if you want to. Here's the way an arithmetic would put it: Six per cent interest for a year on \$20,000 is \$1,200; for six months or half a year, \$600. Therefore each of the sixty coupons on a thirty-year bond for \$20,000 would call for \$600."

"I think it all begins to soak into my coconut," said Ham. "But it's too much like school for me to want to hear any more. What did my Dad do with the bonds put in his hands?"

"That's the very thing we all want to know," said Uncle Ben. "I think—in fact, I am certain—that a man named Gideon Morganfield stole them, but that I've never been able to prove. Unfortunately, these bonds did not have the owner's name on them. They were like greenbacks in that respect. Once lost there was little chance of recovering them, unless they fell into

the hands of an honest person who knew they had been lost."

"Who is this thief Morganfield?" asked Ham, as innocently as if he and Snag had never heard of the "resurrectionist."

"He's a gambler and a blackleg, but thus far has been able to escape justice, chiefly, I suspect, because he was educated as a lawyer. About a year before his death your father took Morganfield, a younger man than himself, in the law office with him and helped the scoundrel in every way possible. I never liked the fellow but Major Willingham said he was bright and promising and would outgrow his faults."

"How did Morganfield get his hands on the bonds?"

"Oh, that would have been easy at any time since he had your father's confidence, but it came about naturally when Major Willingham was unexpectedly called to Savannah on business. In order to get a little rest and sea air, he decided to go South by boat. Before starting, he turned over to Morganfield for safekeeping all the important papers relating to the rich man's estate

— among them the bonds, unless I'm greatly deceived. They were to be put in a fireproof vault. A week later came the awful news that Major Willingham had been washed overboard in a storm. Your mother and I at first were too stunned to think of your father's professional affairs, but in a reasonable time I took hold of this business.

“Of course I went to Morganfield. He pretended to be deeply grieved over your father's death and said he would do anything in the world to help me. Then of his own free will he told me that Major Willingham had turned over some valuable documents to him and that he would produce them at once. This he did. Every paper was in ship shape and showed how systematically your father had done his work. But the bonds were missing.”

“What did Morganfield say about them?”

“He expressed great surprise at my supposing he had the bonds and swore they never had been in his hands. There was absolutely no way I could prove the contrary; indeed, for the time bein' I accepted his word. Then, too, the scoun-

drel promised to do everything he could to help me find them. Two months passed and though we searched high and low, the lost papers did not show up. Even advertisements published in the papers failed to throw any light on the matter. Finally Morganfield took me aside one day and in a half whisper he said, 'Captain, I guess you've begun to think as I do. Maybe Major Willingham had those bonds with him when he took the trip. You know he left rather suddenly.' "

"What did he mean by that?" asked Ham.

"He was pretending that he thought your father stole them. When I realized the charge he was making, I said, 'Morganfield, you are a hound to hint at a thing like that. Some day those bonds are going to turn up, unless you yourself have stolen them, and when that day comes I'm going to cowhide you for what you've just said.' "

"I want to be on hand when you do it," said Ham, "or better still, I'd prefer to do it myself if I come within reach of him."

CHAPTER XX

AN INVISIBLE COW BELLOWS IN THE MUD

It must not be supposed that either the visit of the repentant sinner, John Teaford, or the information Ham got about the missing bonds, long diverted the minds of the two Richmond boys from their thoughts of the Charles City dragon. Indeed, they never went to the stable to see Nigger without asking the oft-repeated question, What bit him? or without speculating as to the nature of the monster which had maimed the dog.

Under these circumstances, you may be sure that Ham and Snag danced with joy when Uncle Ben announced one morning that he was going back to Dancing Point with Buck Timberlake and that the two youngsters might accompany him.

This was two days after the talk about the tragic death of Major Willingham. Since that time the veteran had seemed to keep out of

Ham's way and had not renewed the conversation they had. If the truth must be known, the old soldier hoped that he was done with that matter so far as his nephew was concerned. But he reckoned without his host.

After the party had reached Dancing Point, and Gumbo, still unusually sober, had put the shack in order, the fat boy found another opportunity to see the peg-leg warrior alone. He immediately used it to ask further questions. "Uncle Ben," said he, "you didn't tell me what you and Ma did when all your searchin' failed to bring those bonds to light? Didn't you ever get on the track of them?"

"Not to this day have they been found," replied Uncle Ben. "There were ten coupon bonds in all—each of the denomination of two thousand dollars. By what I then regarded as a stroke of good luck I came across a memorandum showing the company's number for each bond. These numbers also appeared on the bonds themselves. Using this information, I published in all the larger Virginia papers a notice telling of the loss of the bonds and giving the number of each.

I also had printed three thousand circular letters which I have sent broadcast over the country to all persons, firms or companies likely to buy such securities. I begged all honest people to communicate with me in the event the bonds were offered them for sale or other purposes.

“But six months ago a Norfolk firm wrote me that four interest coupons clipped off one of the missing bonds had come into its hands. They were traced back to a bad character in that town. Now Gideon Morganfield left Richmond, where he and your father had practiced law, less than a year after Major Willingham’s death and settled in Norfolk. There he went from bad to worse, and now I am told that he runs a gambling den. You can put two and two together and guess why I suspect him.”

“Did you and Ma have to pay the money back?” asked Ham.

Uncle Ben looked hard at the boy for a minute as if he hesitated to answer the question. Then he slowly replied, “Ham, you ought to know we are not the kind of people to let others suffer because of our misfortunes. We have

made great sacrifices — cruel sacrifices. That's why your mother is a dressmaker; and that's why Heron's Nest is the ramshackle, tumble-down old place you see. But the rich man's heirs have lost nothing. My sister and I have surrendered every luxury. We have but one complaint to make. There are malicious people who whisper things about your father and solemnly shake their heads when his name is mentioned. I've even seen some of our relatives do it."

"I'd kill 'em if I caught 'em at it," hotly said Ham.

"Be patient, boy, be patient," sighed Uncle Ben, as he wiped his watery eyes with a bandanna handkerchief. "One other thing, too, my son. *Please* don't ask me any more questions about all this. Now run off and play with the other boys and let's forget all about our talk."

Poor fat little Ham — or big Ham, if you prefer. All that day he kept moping about his father's death and his mother's unhappiness. Snag and Buck, quick to notice the lad's misery, determined to cheer him up.

"Let's go down by the spring again tonight,"

said Snag, the wise one, "and look around for the Charles City dragon—no, excuse me, I mean Buck Timberlake's cow sturgeon."

It was remarkable to see the way Ham perked up at this. He accepted the suggestion at once, though it made him sad to think that poor Nigger, lying helpless up in the stable, could not accompany the party.

Gumbo, for his part, flatly declined to go with "de young white gempmun" when the appointed time came. "Nawsuh," said he, violently shaking his woolly head in protest, "I gwine let well ernuf be. Sumpin dun hit me one of de pow'fules', rambunctious whacks dis nigger eber got down dar, an' my stummuck am plum full uv dat dar draggum. Reckon dat frizzle-haar Newfoumlum dorg feels de same way, too. Him an' me dun got our share uv trubbul already."

To the great disappointment of the boys, nothing in any way unusual was to be found at the spring. Even with the use of a lantern no footprints or tracks could be seen.

But the three were determined to have some

sort of an adventure, so they pushed on farther still until they reached the place near which Nigger had been injured. Here the land was overgrown with grasses and reeds, none of which, however, were over knee high. This territory, in addition to being wet, soggy and hard to travel, seemed equally as uninteresting as the rest of the ground traversed.

"I'm for quittin' all this mud larkin' and slushin' back home to bed," said Snag. "It's a poor night for dragons and cow sturgeons."

Ham and Buck thought the same way, so they all turned back. Just as they wheeled around, a dreary, mooing sound, apparently near the water's edge, struck their ears from the rear.

Each boy halted to listen. Nobody got excited or frightened. Buck, after the first pause, laughingly said, "Hi there, some old cow's gone and got stuck in the mud."

"Cow sturgeon, you mean," retorted Snag. "You'll be tellin' us in a minute that they moo just like cattle, so hurry up and git it out quick."

"No, this time I mean a four-legged cow," laughed Buck.

A moment later, however, the would-be preacher in his heart wasn't quite so ready to admit that the sound came even from an ordinary four-legged cow. By then the noise had developed into a bellowing, and this, in turn, changed into a thunderous rumbling, punctuated at intervals by tremulous blasts which resounded over the marshlands like some unearthly trumpet call.

"The dragon!" whispered Ham in awed tones.

"An old cow mired way down deep in the mud," insisted stubborn Buck Timberlake, who knew he was fibbing.

"An old cow sturgeon bellowin' to be milked," chuckled the owner of Billy Mahone, who also knew he, too, was fibbing.

Even as the boys spoke, their noses, as well as their ears, sensed a strange presence. On the damp, malarial air there came to their nostrils a sickening, fetid odor, something like the smell of musk, but far from pleasant.

This, like the noise, died away in time; and then Buck Timberlake, looking deathly pale in the lantern light, spoke up and said, "I don't

care what you two think of me. I'm going to admit right here that that bellowing had me skeered out of my socks for a little spell. While I know it's a cow, I'm bound to say the old girl made the curiourest sounds I ever heard."

"Goose bumps are still as thick as hops on me," confessed Ham, "and I'm so flustered I can't see straight. Nuthin' could make me believe that that there thing we've heard hollering was a cow."

"It certainly wasn't no canary bird," piped Snag, trying to "act smart," but fooling nobody, "and I'll eat my hat if it's a cow. But no matter what it turns out to be, my heart's going flippety-flop. I say let's scoot."

"Not much we don't," answered Buck. "Skeered or not skeered, we're going down thar by the water's edge and help pull that beef outer the mud. Here in Charles City we folks stick by each other. I'd be the last one in the land to let a neighbor lose a head of stock without lendin' a helpin' hand if it could be saved."

Unwilling to "take a dare," though feeling much inclined to show the white feather, Ham

and Snag agreed to accompany Buck. But Oh! how they did hate that country gawk for having challenged them to follow him.

Had anyone said "Boo" about this time, there's no telling what those boys might have done. Yet whistling to keep up their courage, they proceeded to the place whence the noise had come.

There they found — absolutely nothing.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DRAGON PUTS ALL TO FLIGHT

Of course the boys dragged Uncle Ben aside early the next morning and told the tobacco-chewing veteran all about the invisible cow that had bellowed in the mud. The story was too good to keep. Moreover the youngsters by now had grown positively uneasy and needed the moral support of a grown-up. So strange and harrowing had been their experiences that they had almost come to the belief that Dancing Point had a "hant" who was quite as wonderful and far more dangerous than the old-time demon out-danced by the traditional Lightfoot.

Uncle Ben listened with a quizzical smile hiding among his gray whiskers, and then he roared out, "If you read history you'll see where the colonists originally intended to build a great big town in Charles City. Even to this day we haven't so much as a one-horse village in the

county. I propose to establish here a hospital for the insane. Already I've got four lunatics — Buck, Ham, Snag and Gumbo — and darn my buttons if I don't sometimes feel that I'm gettin' looney, too."

"What makes you talk that-a-way, Uncle Ben?" humbly inquired Ham.

"Well, sirs," thundered the old soldier as he jabbed his wooden leg into a pile of soft sand, "it's because of the yarns you young whipper-snappers and that nigger Gumbo are always tellin' me. Every time you leave the house you come back with some hair-raisin', cock-and-bull story."

"But sumthin' certainly did chaw Nigger's leg," interrupted Snag. "That sure ain't no lie. You kin see his sawed-off paw in alcohol."

"Yes," admitted Uncle Ben, "and that's what makes me so all-fired mad. I can't puzzle out that dog's mishap. It wasn't a shark, a sturgeon or a turtle that nabbed him, and it ain't likely that he tackled a buzz-saw or got tangled up in a threshing machine, so I keep askin' myself what did injure him. You see, I'm goin'

crazy like the rest of you. Plague if I don't peg along with you-all the next time you do any nosin' around even if I get rheumatism in my wooden leg."

Had the old soldier known how quickly he would be taken at his word he would never have uttered it. All that forenoon Ham, Snag and Buck waited for Uncle Ben to finish his work, and the minute he settled down after dinner for a thoughtful chew, they pounced upon him. "If you'll go with us," urged Ham, "we promise to find the dragon or bust."

So the poor old warrior, though secretly hankering after a nap, finally consented to stump along with his younger companions. It was a heavy, hot day, and there were hungry mosquitoes a plenty to worry everybody, but all the same the youngsters made rapid strides. This means that Uncle Ben got far more exercise than he had bargained for. Despite his fatigue, however, he patiently inspected all the "dragon landmarks," as he called them, and showed no signs of balking when a plunge into the reed-grown marsh was proposed.

Locomotion now became more and more difficult, for the vegetation grew thicker and the ground wetter at almost every step. Time and again the agonized cries "Ouch!" or "Holy mackerel!" revealed that one of the boys had suffered a cut or scratch. Uncle Ben fared worst of all. More than once his wooden leg went down deep in the mud while his good leg remained high and dry.

This sort of traveling under the summer sun soon exhausted everybody. It would have ended in short order had Buck not found a sort of trail. This, aside from the relief it offered, had other attractions. There was something peculiar about it. One naturally found one's self asking the question, Who or what made it and why was it made? To judge by the manner in which the vegetation had been beaten down, the path was the work of some heavy animal. Yet what was the purpose of the animal?

Going in one direction the trail led ninety feet onward to the river bank. Followed in the other direction it ended abruptly in a dense, piled-up tangle of broken reeds, and marsh grasses.

Much puzzled, the boys went sleuthing back and forth over the short path. Neither they nor Uncle Ben could account for it, nor could any tracks or footprints be found to enlighten them. Finally Buck said: "I'm going to take a squint at that pile of brush." Regardless of danger he jumped over into the tangle and began looking around.

It was but a moment before his companions heard him cry out, "I've found it. There's a great big nest in here and it's got some whoppin' eggs in it!"

That was enough for Ham and Snag. In two shakes of a sheep's tail they were standing by the side of Buck and all three were gazing at the nest. An outlandish-looking affair this nest was, too. At first barely distinguishable from the surrounding vegetation, closer inspection showed that it was conically shaped like a mound, and stood up about four feet from the ground. Among the leaves in its center lay five eggs, each about the size of a turkey egg.

"The old bird that laid them was a buster," excitedly remarked Snag, "but to save me, I

can't see why she put 'em so high above the earth."

"Maybe 'twas an ostrich," ventured Ham, and then he gleefully added, "Yes, that's it—'twas an ostrich; and she's the same bird that kicked Gumbo and made them tracks near the spring."

"Ostrich nuthin', sneered Snag. "I seen in a geog'fry where an ostrich ain't got but two toes."

"Then 'twas a wild turkey or maybe a turkey buzzard that built this thing here," ventured Buck, who meanwhile had been putting the eggs into his hat.

Ham advised leaving the nest undisturbed, but Snag was not so easily satisfied. "Let's scratch down in it a little ways and see what's at the bottom," suggested that restless youth.

Imagine the surprise of all when, after removing several handfuls of decaying leaves and reeds, the boys found a second lot of eggs—nine this time. These were about eight inches beneath the first five and rested on a layer of grass and mud.

“There must be more still,” exclaimed Snag, who was hard to satisfy. “We ain’t anywhere near the bottom, Let’s scratch down in the nest again.”

Though the boys had been astonished before, they now gasped with amazement. Below the second set of eggs they came across still another stratum of mud and grass, on which reposed thirteen eggs.

“Gee whillikens! it’s a regular three-story house,” exclaimed Buck. “I’ve been around a heap in this county and I’ve seen lots of nests, but I never set eyes on the likes of this before. It’s a regular incubator. Let’s dig down still a little deeper.”

But no more eggs were found, and so the youngsters fell into a dispute as to whether or not they should rob the nest. Ham’s counsel prevailed and the eggs were not taken away.

All perhaps would have ended well had the investigation ceased at this point. But Snag, as usual, wasn’t satisfied. An impulse to rub two of the eggs against each other and thus test the strength of their shells, seized the inquisitive

boy. Before anybody could stop him he was trying the experiment.

Vastly different from what had been expected were the results of this trick. Not more than three times had Snag scraped the surfaces of the shells together when Uncle Ben, standing just a little beyond the nest, was heard to bellow like a bull.

“Here it comes, boys, here it comes,” he thundered. “Run for your lives. Don’t lose a second. Never mind about me. Each man for himself. THE DRAGON IS ON US!!”

No further warning was needed. That one cry sufficed. Each youngster made a mad leap for the path. A deer could not have outjumped them just then. Yet, with all their terror, the fugitives somehow found an opportunity to glance around. Behind them they saw a sight both horrible and grotesque—a sight well calculated to freeze the very marrow in their bones. Uncle Ben was in full flight and making marvelous time despite his wooden leg. Crawling rapidly up the path from the river and only four yards in the rear of the retreating veteran, was a hideous

monster of unbelievable size. To the bulging eyes of Ham and Snag and Buck it looked as large as a steamboat. As an actual fact it was more than ten feet long.

With a single glance the boys were able to perceive that their pursuer was a gigantic, scaly reptile of olive green color. Between the horny, saw-toothed plates on its long back and tail glistened the water of the river from which it had just emerged. From its flat, spoon-shaped head protruded two cruel yellow eyes set in sockets raised far above the skull. In its huge open mouth gleamed mighty teeth that were well-nigh appalling. Though moving on short, bowed legs, which sprawled far apart, the creature made astonishing progress. Fortunately, however, its speed was not so great, proportionately, as that of a lizard or snake.

Nor did the monster have the speed of Ham, Snag and Buck, which means that they out-distanced the reptile in a jiffy.

Not so with Uncle Ben. He was giving the fearful thing some magnificent lessons in running, when ker-plunk! down went his wooden

leg into a mud puddle. There he stuck. Try as he might he could not extricate himself.

Meanwhile the oncoming monster speedily dragged its scaly length towards the imprisoned veteran. Was the old rebel who had so long defied the shot and shell of the Union army to perish now like a rat in a trap? Not much. He wasn't that sort of a quitter. Uncle Ben always had maintained that a man never was really dead until he was in his coffin and planted underground. With no weapons of defense at hand and absolutely helpless, he now decided to put his theory into practice.

From afar the boys heard him roar out, "Dern your stinking hide, if you come an inch nearer, I'll kick the stuffings out of you with my good leg."

Oh, miracle of miracles! The reptile did not call the old soldier's bluff. It came up within six feet of Uncle Ben and paused. Then, hearing the threat, it defiantly polluted the air with its foul, musky odor, turned around and quickly made its way back to the river.

Three minutes later the veteran, in his usual

tone of voice, was yelling to the boys, "Come on here, you young whippersnappers, and drag me out of the mud. I've skeered the varmint off."

With far more caution than they ever had before displayed, Ham, Snag and Buck retraced their steps. Each one, perhaps, was just a little ashamed of having left Uncle Ben in the lurch, but hadn't he himself told them to fly?

The mud-gripped prisoner, however, had no complaint to make. He appeared quite calm and was placidly chewing tobacco when the trembling boys reached him.

"Why don't you unstrap your wooden leg and leave it where it is if you can't do any better?" suggested resourceful Snag. "We'll let you use us for crutches."

"Bless my soul, I was so flabbergasted I never thought of it," chuckled the old soldier. "I'll do that very thing." Aided by his young friends, he thereupon proceeded to part company with his hickory limb. This done, the wooden leg was duly rescued.

When Uncle Ben had once more been restored

to his original post-bellum footing, he turned to the youngsters and said, "Well, boys, we certainly got a run for our money. I haven't done so much skedaddling since I ran into a bunch of Yankees near Seven Pines."

"What is that fearful thing that has us all going," pantingly begged Ham.

"Well, sirs," said Uncle Ben, spouting tobacco juice and waving his arms, "your dragon is nothing more or less than a huge alligator. How it got here God alone knows."

CHAPTER XXII

A STRANGER COMES TO SPOIL THE FUN

Although Ham and Snag and Buck had not been slow to run when the alligator came all dripping out of the river, they no sooner reached the shack than their courage returned with tremendous force. Safe out of danger's way, they now urged Uncle Ben to borrow some weapons and go back with them to the scene of their recent flight.

But the old soldier had enough exercise and excitement for one day. To the profound disappointment of his young friends he shook his head. "I'm sorry, boys," said he, "but the lady dragon will have to wait. We must get a little rest today and tomorrow we'll all have to be off for Heron's Nest."

Somebody is forever taking the joy out of life. Right at the very time when things were getting positively thrilling, the boys were called upon to

turn their backs on all the fun and go home. The announcement nearly broke their hearts. No wonder Ham was almost weeping when he asked what was the reason for the unexpected change of programme.

“I have an important engagement at Heron’s Nest,” explained Uncle Ben. “A man is to meet me there for a business talk which cannot be postponed. His letter was forwarded to me this morning. Later on we may return here but go tomorrow we must.”

That settled it. Protests were useless, and the youngsters resigned themselves to their hard luck. But their heads were full of plans for the future. Each one nursed a burning desire to kill the alligator. Ham couldn’t get his mind off the subject and it wasn’t long before he was quizzing Uncle Ben about the reptile.

“Why did you call the thing a *lady* dragon?” asked the fat boy. “I don’t see how you could tell whether the monster was a lady or a gentleman.”

“You stupid kid!” exclaimed the old soldier. “Don’t you know that that pile of brush you-all

were pokin' into was the alligator's nest and that she laid those big eggs? No bird makes such a nest. I'm only venturing a guess when I say your beloved dragon was a female, but I don't think I'm wrong. It was the mother instinct that made her want to protect her eggs. Since I come to think about it, I'm sorry I spoke so rudely to the lady, but really she wasn't behavin' herself when I 'cussed her out'."

Up to this time it had not occurred to Ham and his associates to connect the alligator with the nest, though they had been quick enough to accept the reptile as the Charles City dragon about which the negroes had talked so much. Things began to clear up marvelously after Uncle Ben's explanation, though a good many doubtful points yet remained to be settled.

"If that critter that made us git such a hump on ourselves is a lady alligator, do you suppose there are also some gentlemen alligators in the swamp?" questioned Snag of the veteran.

Uncle Ben cautiously expressed the belief that the "lady" he had addressed so roughly undoubtedly had a husband somewhere, but he was

not prepared to speak positively as to the husband's place of residence.

“ To tell you the truth, boys,” he added, “ I’m altogether mystified. I’ve lived here all my life, but up to this hour I’ve never heard a human being mention that there were alligators in Charles City county. We’ve never had ’em heretofore and we don’t want ’em now. But if those eggs hatch I can’t tell what may happen. At the first opportunity we’ll go back and rob that nest. I don’t like the idea of having the ‘ Jeems ’ and Chickahominy rivers filled with the pesky varmints, big or little.”

This proposition was like oil on troubled waters. It proved most consoling to the boys. If carried out it meant still another adventure; and adventures couldn’t come fast enough for Ham, Snag and Buck.

Everybody arose at sunup the next day for in addition to the long drive from Dancing Point to Heron’s Nest, many other matters had to be attended to. Then, too, Uncle Ben explained that he wanted to stop on the way at Wilson’s wharf to meet a man who was coming down on the

Ariel from Richmond to talk business to him.

This suited the boys finely. They liked to see the boat arrive and to watch the loading and unloading of freight. Something interesting nearly always happened on such occasions. But Ham and Snag were not quite prepared for the surprise which awaited them at the wharf that day.

Standing close to the gangplank, the boys saw a long string of passengers — mostly negroes — get off the steamer. Uncle Ben, they noticed, had an unusual look on his face as he watched the crowd coming to the landing. Then he bristled up like a man getting ready to fight. The next minute he was bowing stiffly to a well-dressed stranger.

This new-comer, but for his bowed legs, his ugly ears and his eyes, which came close together, might almost have been called good-looking.

He was Gideon Morganfield, gambler, crook and “ resurrectionist.”

CHAPTER XXIII

A FIGHTING SAVAGE DROPS FROM NOWHERE

It was in the somber, moth-eaten old parlor of the mansion at Heron's Nest that Uncle Ben and Gideon Morganfield finally had their "business talk."

Before the arrival of the boat at the wharf, the old soldier had told himself over and over again that he would not allow the blackleg to enter his house; but at the last minute his sense of Old Dominion hospitality had made him weaken, and so he opened the doors to the unwelcome visitor.

Morganfield, despite his bad qualities, could assume good manners when it suited his purpose. His early associations had all been with gentlemen, and before he fell from grace, he had often been a guest at Heron's Nest. The ancient, paneled room, with its damask curtains and tottering mahogany furniture therefore was no unfamiliar sight to him, though it must have

hurt his conscience to note the signs of decay on every side.

“If you’ll permit the remark,” he smoothly said, by way of opening the conversation, “this place awakens some pleasant memories in my mind.”

“Possibly so,” dryly remarked Uncle Ben, “but if I understand your letters, we are here not to indulge in sentiment but to talk business. That is the condition on which I received you.”

“Come, come, Captain,” retorted the gambler in a soft, wheedling voice, “there’s nothing to be gained by harshness, and you need not fear that I’ll obtrude a moment longer than is necessary.”

“Very well, what’s your proposition about the missing bonds?”

“My proposition,” said Morganfield, showing just a little irritation, “is really an offer of friendly assistance. I think there are ways by which I might get on the track of those missing securities for you.”

“Friendly assistance from your quarter is something I hardly expect at this late day,” re-

plied the veteran. "You declined to lend that years ago when you had the chance. Now, I take it, the help you offer will be on a basis of dollars and cents. How much do you want—in a word, what are we to pay you for your 'friendly assistance'."

"Let's proceed without exchanging sarcasms," coldly suggested Morganfield, biting his lips and shifting his eyes towards the portraits of the stern old-time Virginians that lined the walls. "I'm here to do a favor and I don't want to lose my temper, though you are pressing me sorely."

"All right, sir, I promise to exercise self-control. Go ahead; go ahead, I'll listen. We are alone and you can talk freely. After all, it's only fair to hear what you have to say."

"That's more satisfactory," replied the uncomfortable visitor, as he tugged at the lion's tooth on his watch chain. "I'll begin by admitting what you've probably heard already: Of late years circumstances have made a professional card player of me. In my walk of life, which isn't altogether what I would like it to be, I come in contact with many loose characters

and pick up much of the gossip about questionable people. Recently, through means I am not at liberty to explain, I came across a clew concerning the bonds once in the hands of Major Willingham."

"The person who holds them can hardly be an honest man," snapped Uncle Ben, "since their loss has been widely advertised for years."

"That is a point I'll not argue," replied Morganfield. "Neither will I say that I know the party who has them. Furthermore, I may find later on that I can do nothing to assist you. It is my belief, however, with the present lights before me, that I can actually recover the bonds."

"On what conditions?"

Morganfield paused, slyly cast his shifting eyes in every direction about the room, and said, "I am led to believe that they will be put safely into your hands provided the sum of \$2,000 is paid me as agent, or representative, of the person holding them."

"So I'm to take the chance of trusting you with \$2,000, although you yourself are not cer-

tain the individual holding the securities will agree to part with them."

"No, you are to take no chances," replied the gambler in honeyed tones, as though about to confer a favor. "The proposition is this: If you give me your word of honor as a gentleman that you will ask no questions and will agree to pay me the sum named *after* the receipt of the papers, the bonds will be sent you. To put it plainly, you pay nothing until you get the securities. Of course, too, you are to keep quiet about this interview."

"Do I hear you right," roared Uncle Ben. "I'm to pay \$2,000 to a thief who has allowed the name of my sister's husband to be blackened; and in gratitude for the return of stolen property he's afraid to sell, I'm to pledge myself to silence. Morganfield, that is blackmail. You cowardly, contemptible scoundrel, do you think you are dealing with another of your fellow criminals? I'll give you just two minutes to get out of this house."

The peppery old man by now had altogether forgotten his determination to keep cool. He

was a picture of rage as he arose from his chair and advanced toward the other man.

Morganfield instantly realized his game would not work. Stung by his sense of defeat, he quickly showed his cloven foot. "You old idiot," he slowly said—and his lip curled upward like the mouth of a snarling cur, as he inched back from the ex-Confederate, "I'd kick you into the middle of next week if you didn't hide behind that wooden leg and your gray hairs. Let the world continue to call your Major Willingham a thief. After the abuse you've heaped on me, I'll see you burning in torment before I let you have those bonds."

What happened the next minute could never be accurately described. Something creaked like the hinge on a small door. Then, apparently coming from nowhere, a mass of flesh and bone struck Morganfield almost with the force of a thunderbolt and sent him reeling backward.

Through eyes that were nearly blinded by a rain of blows the gambler vaguely saw before him a face that seemed half human and half devil. It was not the kindly face of the old sol-

dier whom he had so grossly insulted in his own home; Uncle Ben was standing a mute witness of all that was happening. Neither did it appear to be the face of a white man nor yet that of a negro. The creature that so wildly attacked Morganfield — at first one wondered if it were not some demon — revealed features that were more fantastic than those of a painted savage in the delirium of battle. A flaming red glistened on one cheek and on the nose, while elsewhere the face was bespattered with a shining black.

Some instinct of self-protection enabled the gambler, despite the suddenness of the onslaught, to shield himself behind a high-backed chair.

This brought about a cessation of hostilities on the part of the man's assailant. The pounding ceased and a high, shrill voice shrieked out, "I've got you at last, you dirty dog — you low-down scoundrel — you sneakin' resurrectionist."

Uncle Ben, still almost dumb with astonishment, at last began to realize what was happening. In the dirty, bedraggled figure before him, despite the dripping reds and blacks on its face,

he recognized his fat nephew, Hamilton Bacon Willingham.

“How dare you behave like that, you young rascal?” boomed the master of the house, when he recovered his power of speech. “I’ve a great mind to whale you within an inch of your life. You’ve outraged every law of decency. This man, scoundrel and blackleg though he be, came into my home under a guarantee of protection. I pledged my word that we should be alone and that no one would overhear us. You’ve made me out a liar, and a coward, too, for I needed no help to force Morganfield to swallow the words he’s just uttered.”

“Confound your laws of decency!” yelled Ham, quite beside himself with excitement and wrath. “Didn’t you hear what he said about my Dad? This bow-legged sneak is worse than a thief. He’s a vile, filthy resurrectionist—a low-down body snatcher.”

“Enough of this, young man,” thundered the old soldier, who did not at all understand what Ham was driving at and halfway believed the boy had gone crazy. “Leave the room instantly.

I've a word I want to say alone with Morganfield."

Ham started to obey. He sullenly turned and walked to the door. Then, unable to calm himself, he wheeled around and whirled himself at Morganfield like a wildcat. Uncle Ben pounced upon the youngster, seized him by the collar and hustled him out of the parlor. Ham made no effort to resist his kinsman, but began to bawl out at the top of his voice, "Uncle Ben, you don't understand. I ain't done no wrong. Dare him to tell you where he was on the night of June 20. Ask him if he knows a negro hack-driver named Sam Simpson. Find out what he does in Richmond buryin'-grounds."

Bang! The old soldier had put the excited boy out and slammed the door in his face. This done, he turned to Morganfield and said, "Let me hasten to apologize for the conduct of my nephew, whose presence in this room was totally unknown to me. I am sincerely sorry for what he said and did. But on the other hand, sir, I demand an immediate retraction of the insulting words you uttered a little while ago."

Morganfield, deathly pale and much the worse for the blows inflicted upon him, looked hard at the courtly old warrior standing before him and at first made no response. Then, as if moved by some better self, he said, "Captain, from you no apology is necessary. As for me, I willingly withdraw the offensive remarks I made. They should not have been uttered. You will pardon me, however, if I ask whether I am to see that devilish boy again before I leave. If I am to be waylaid by him either here or on the way to the wharf, I must be prepared, at least, to defend myself."

"You shall not set eyes on him again, sir," said the captain, "at any rate not while you are in this county. I pledge my word for that. To make this certain, or rather to prevent any further scenes, I'll accompany you to the landing. But would you not first prefer to give a little attention to your injuries?"

"My wounds will not kill me," curtly replied Morganfield, "nor shall I tarry here to give them attention. But there are reasons why I would thank you to drive me to the wharf."

“That I will cheerfully do,” said Uncle Ben, to whom politeness was a second nature.

But it was not a merry ride these two men had when they drove back to the steamer landing that hot afternoon. Hardly a hundred words did they exchange. The gambler silently nursed two badly bruised eyes with a gaudy silk-handkerchief; and Uncle Ben — well, he simply kept quiet and chewed tobacco.

As Morganfield stepped on the gangplank of the steamer, he put his hand into an inner coat pocket, drew forth a large envelope, placed it in the veteran's hand and said, “Open this when you return home but not before.”

CHAPTER XXIV

A SINNER SCARED INTO BEING GOOD

Jogging back all alone from the wharf in his decrepit buggy Uncle Ben began to think over the many things that had happened since morning. "What in the name of high heaven got into that nephew of mine?" asked the peg-leg veteran of himself. "He looked and talked and acted like a madman, and yet, when I come to reflect about it, I can't much blame him. Durn it all, I've done that boy an injustice somehow. What's more, I was an old hypocrite to pretend that I was sorry he pounded Morganfield. My only regret is that I didn't do it myself."

With such thoughts as these buzzing in his brain, the good man, after reaching Heron's Nest, made his way through the boxwood hedges to the front porch of the mansion. There, seated on the dilapidated stone steps with a

far-away look in his eyes, was Ham. The youngster was strangely calm, and the cleanliness of his face, hands and shirt showed all too plainly that Cousins Millie and Bettie Lou had taken him in hand.

“My son,” said Uncle Ben, “I’ve got an idea I handled you too roughly a little while ago, though your conduct and your words are still beyond my understanding. Either you or I must have gone clean crazy. Why in the name of all that is good and holy did you come bouncin’ in on Morganfield and me, and *where* in Christendom did you drop from?”

“Well, sir, there wasn’t much magic about my droppin’ in on you,” said Ham with a grin which showed he bore no hard feelings against his kinsman. “All the time you two was jawin each other I was hid in a cubby-hole in the paneling. Gee, it was hot in there, and my, how I did sweat! It sure is the dickens to be fat when you gotta squeeze into a hole like that one.”

“But how did you slip into the room without our seeing you?”

"That wasn't no fancy trick, neither," modestly said the boy. "Me and Snag found the hole in the paneling weeks ago and others, too. When you and Morganfield stopped a minute at the stable, I sneaked off and ran into the parlor. I knew you were going there and that I didn't have time to lose, so I jammed myself head first into the cubby hole and closed its little door tight behind me."

"What made you paint yourself up that way like an Indian chief on the warpath?"

"It wasn't paint that gormed me up so," replied Ham, "and if I'd a had my way I never would have got messed up like you saw me. Two bottles of ink—one red and one black—was in the cubby hole on a tiny shelf and neither of the plague-take-it bottles had any stopper in 'em. First thing I knew I'd knocked both over, and they began drippin' on me. Honest, Uncle Ben, it seems to me like I drank ink. A regular river began pourin' down in my eyes and nose and mouth. I didn't know an ink bottle could hold so much. But that wasn't all. The place was dark as Egypt and

full of dust, and I jes sat there all scrunched up and ate dirt and drank ink while I sweated. Even this wouldn't have been so bad if somebody hadn't put a broken package of tacks in the cubby-hole. Every time I moved one stuck in me. When I jumped out the seat of my pants was as full of tacks as a carpet. No wonder I hankered after a fight when you first seen me."

Things began to get just a little clearer for Uncle Ben, though there was still a great deal that he failed to comprehend. Almost dying to laugh at the account of his nephew's troubles, he nevertheless thought it best to keep a straight face as he pursued the inquiry further.

"What possessed you to squeeze into that cubby-hole and eavesdrop when you must have known we wanted to have a private conversation?" he asked.

Strange as had been the happenings of that day, the old soldier was not prepared for the amazing answer which came in response to this question.

"Uncle Ben," said the son of the house of

Willingham, looking his kinsman squarely in the face, "I shan't lie to you even if it kills me. Snag and me is criminals jes' like Morganfield — fugitives from justice. Almost ever since we've been here we've felt that our very footsteps was bein' dogged."

"What's that? What's that?" roared the peg-leg veteran, as he jumped out of his chair like a grasshopper and stumped towards Ham.

Without flinching the boy now told of everything — the rescue of Nigger, the grave robbery in the cemetery, the bar-room scene on the steamboat and the manner in which he had overheard the conversation between Captain Christian and John Teaford.

"At last I see," said Uncle Ben, with a roof-lifting burst of laughter when the long recital was over. "Well, if it don't beat bobtail! I never heard the like of it! Who'd have thought it, Ham? Bless you, kid, you're no criminal; you're a great boy — a seven days wonder. And so is Snag Perkins. Take me out and tar and feather me. I'm the thick-headedest old fool alive. If I'd listened to you we'd have

Morganfield here a prisoner right this minute. He understood. The very minute you said 'resurrectionist' and 'buryin--ground' he knew you had the drop on him. That's the reason he wished to hustle off so quick and didn't want me to see you again. He knew you'd never let up until you made me understand."

"Don't take it so hard, Uncle Ben," said Ham, who had begun to feel just a little self-important after so much praise. "Who knows, we may catch Morganfield yet; anyhow, we got him on the run."

"By the way, just as the scoundrel took the boat he gave me some papers to read," remarked the veteran, recalling the big envelope in his pocket. "I can't imagine what they are. Excuse me while I glance over them."

Peeping out of the corner of his eye, Ham saw his uncle's face twitch in most unusual fashion as he scanned the contents of the envelope and then he heard him exclaim in an exultant voice, "Oh joy! Wonders will never cease! I can hardly believe my eyes. Ham, it's all your doings. Morganfield, without a word of expla-

nation, has returned the bonds he stole — all of them; and there're only five interest coupons missing. Glory hallelujah!

“ ‘ While yet the light holds out to burn
The vilest sinner may return.’ ”

“ Hooray for Nigger and Snag and the dog pound and the graveyard and the steamboat and even for the lady dragon! ” whooped Ham, “ but drat that rat, Gideon Morganfield, and the likes of him. Take my word for it, Uncle Ben, he's one vile sinner that's never going to return, lamp or no lamp. 'Twasn't no piety or repentance but the skeerin' he got from me that made him let loose them bonds. ”

Ham was right. Morganfield, to use the language of one Mr. Jefferson Davis Perkins, was a bad egg.

CHAPTER XXV

A GOOD MOTHER GIVES UP THE GHOST

Was there ever such a queer procession as that which filed through the marshes near Dancing Point on the scorching July day of which we write? At the head of the column, almost buried in a huge pair of bluejeans breeches, was a country gawk who carried a muzzle-loading shotgun. Behind him followed a fat boy with an axe and a lean boy with a gravel-shooter. Then came a bow-legged negro with a heavy garden hoe, a one-legged man with a cavalry saber and a horse pistol, and last of all, a three-legged dog with no weapons but his teeth.

It will no doubt be easy to recognize the members of this strange hunting party. Yes, Buck and Ham and Snag and Gumbo and Uncle Ben and good old Nigger all were out in quest of the lady dragon, and each was headed for the mysterious nest in the canebrakes.

As had been the case before, the going through the swampy lowgrounds was far from pleasant, particularly for Uncle Ben, but every face wore a do-or-die expression, and things promised to grow dreadfully hot for the object of their search.

At last the nest was reached and the scene was set for a thrilling climax. One essential, however, was lacking. Although the eggs remained just as they had appeared before, and all the weapons were primed for business, no alligator hove in sight. What a throw-down! What a disappointment! In order to kill one must have something to kill.

A five-minute wait convinced all that the lady dragon was not suicidally inclined. Despite whoops, shouts, whistlings and a mighty beating of bushes, she did not appear. Seemingly there was no way to get her to accept the challenge from her enemies. Over and over again the boys ventured out of the trail into the reeds and marsh grasses, but all in vain.

Gumbo, who had grown bolder and bolder as the signs of danger became fewer and fewer,

even shuffled down to the river bank and there bade defiance to the common foe.

“Nuthin’ doin’,” sadly said Ham, after nearly half an hour of useless “fooling and fiddling.” “That alligator’s like Gideon Morganfield; she knows how to scoot when she smells trouble.”

“I got an idea—naw, jes the part of an idea,” announced Snag, “but I’m going to try it anyway, bein’ as nuthin’ else can’t coax the onery critter to show herself.”

With that he made a monkeylike jump back into the brush heap where stood the nest. Grabbing up two of the eggs he once more began scraping their leathery shells together and making a squeaking noise which could be heard clean to the river.

Not a thing happened at first; indeed, nobody but Snag hoped that anything would happen as a result of his action. But just as the owner of Billy Mahone was about to give up in disgust, a howl came from the water’s edge.

Looking down the trail towards the river, Ham and Buck and Uncle Ben saw Gumbo turn a sort of double somersault as his hoe went

flying in another direction. Something had hit him again and hit him hard.

It was the she-alligator. The cunning creature had popped up suddenly out of the water, given the negro a dizzying swat with her tail, knocked him out of the path, and now was making a bee line for the nest.

“Holy smoke! here she comes lickety split,” yelled Ham. “She’s biffed Gumbo a socdolager with her tail and is streakin’ it right towards us.”

Before even a word could be said in reply, the fat boy, with Nigger at his heels, had rushed axe in hand down the path to meet the hideous monster.

“Come back, come back, you young idiot! You’ll be eaten alive,” bawled Uncle Ben, who quite forgot that he himself had drawn his sword and was rapidly stumping in the same direction.

But Uncle Ben spoke too late. Ham and the lady dragon were speeding towards each other. One or the other had to get out of the road—the path could not hold two.

Appalling was the picture presented by the yawning mouth of the approaching alligator, but it didn't stop Hamilton Bacon Willingham. Verily it looked as if he intended to jump right into the jaws of the reptile. But he had no such end in view.

Within ten inches of the monster the boy leaped out of the path into the reeds. Some sixth sense told him that an alligator cannot turn its head like a horse or dog, and that unless the oncoming saurian got a whack at him with its powerful tail, all would be well.

Some sixth sense also told the reptile that now was the time to act or perish. It twisted its huge length horseshoe fashion like a writhing trout on a fishhook, and was just about to make Ham feel the impact of its 400 pounds when whack! down came the axe.

The blow, aimed with astonishing accuracy, struck the alligator crosswise on its armored back, and the steel, cutting through horny scales and plates, sank deep into its spine. No living animal could have withstood such a lick. The monster was dead a minute after Ham hit it.

But nobody was taking any chances. Uncle Ben by now was alternately lambasting the reptile with his saber and shooting it with his horse pistol. Buck also got busy with his shotgun, and it is needless to say that Mr. Jefferson Davis Perkins lent such assistance as he could with his trusty gravel-shooter.

Nor should it be imagined that those who had suffered the most from the lady dragon now showed a yellow streak in this, her dying hour. Nigger, fiercer than ever he had been before in all his honest dog life, snapped viciously at the alligator's feet—at the five toes on the front feet and the four toes on the hind feet. Gumbo, sore as a boil from the clouting he had just received, plied his hoe as energetically as though competing for honors in a potato grubbing contest.

Under such violent pressure the lady dragon of Charles City yielded up her spirit. Whatever else may be said of her, she had intended to be a loving mother to her unhatched offspring, so let us hope that her soul flew forth-

with to the heavenly everglades where good alligators probably get their reward.

When it was all over and the excitement had abated a little, the various parties to the murder voted to take the carcass of the reptile to Heron's Nest—a big job considering that it was ten feet long and weighed about 400 pounds. It was further agreed that a stop should be made at Wilson's wharf, so that all the county might know of the killing. Lastly it was decided that the monster, though badly mutilated, should be skinned.

Well, all these things were done, though at the cost of much perspiration, for as has been said, the day was beastly hot.

Of course Cousins Millie and Betty Lou, as well as all the Heron's Nest hands, white and black, had to see the dead alligator, though the number of times the sweet ladies exclaimed "Sakes alive" and "Goodness gracious" while inspecting the monster, was positively ridiculous.

A curious thing happened during all this to-do. While Snag was pointing out the five toes on the reptile's front feet and the four toes on

its hind feet, up strutted Billy Mahone. Without an instant's hesitation the silver duckwing hopped up on the alligator's head and crowed lustily.

Thus do the brave pay tribute to the brave. Who knows? maybe the rooster was sounding taps for the lady dragon. At any rate, she had died game, for it took courage to face the fighters who slew her.

CHAPTER XXVI

SIMEON HAWKINS, JOKESMITH, APOLOGIZES

Although Charles City county, Virginia, already has given two presidents for the United States and possibly may furnish more, she has never attained celebrity as a producer of alligators. In fact, no section of the old commonwealth of which she is a part can claim this peculiar line of reptiles as its specialty.

According to naturalists, there was once a time when alligators were found in North Carolina, the state which adjoins Virginia on the south, but even that day has long since passed. In view of this, it becomes necessary to explain the means by which the "lady dragon" reached the Old Dominion, since the laws of Nature are never reversed.

The following letter, written from a certain point in Florida about a week after Ham used his axe with such fine effect, tells how and why

the monster came to the peaceful shores where she caused such a rumpus:

Mr. Daniel Fentress,
Dancing Point, Va.

Dear Dan—

When a man attempts to be funny he always makes a fool of himself. Along about the middle of last May yours truly tried to get funny and he sure did make an ass of himself. To tell the truth, he's been miserable ever since, too. My only hope is that through some stroke of good fortune, this apology will seem unnecessary to you, though I fear just the contrary.

To make a long story short, I shipped you by express at the time mentioned, an immense female alligator. Being in a waggish humor (no, I hadn't been drinking!) I marked the box "Live Turtles." In fancy I pictured your surprise and horror on opening the box. For nearly a week I laughed over the trick, and longed for a chance to see your face when you discovered that your "live turtles" had turned into a still livelier alligator.

Then I got to thinking about my practical joke and it didn't seem funny at all. My better judgment told me that I had made you the victim of a pretty dangerous prank and that serious consequences might result from it.

For the land's sake, hustle off a letter at once and tell me that that dod-blasted old 'gator hasn't done any harm. Better still, tell me that the demnition thing died in transit on the road. Yes, tell me anything except that I have played the very Old Scratch by acting the smart Aleck.

If, as I seriously fear, my joke has resulted in harm or injury to any one, I stand prepared to pay all costs. That's as little as I can do, unless, in addition, I beg you to send the fool-killer down here to kick me.

One thing more: It may interest you to know that the alligator shipped you was a widow. I saw her husband turn up his toes. While out hunting in the everglades one day we came across two nailing big 'gators. They had devoured one of our dogs only an hour or so before, and I suppose we caught 'em on a full stomach. The larger reptile, undoubtedly the male, was quickly killed. We captured the lady. Then I conceived the absurd idea of shipping our prisoner alive to you. That little bit of fun, all told, cost me nearly one hundred dollars in boxing, freight and other charges.

Do you remember that years ago, when I first started for Florida, you laughingly asked me to send you a 'gator. Guess you've forgotten. Well, I didn't forget; wish to heaven I had.

I've prospered down here and made oodles of money. The county where I have my orange groves is almost as fine a one as Charles City. But me for ole Virginny, rich or poor.

The next box I send you will contain oranges — not “live turtles.”

Your lunatic friend,
Simeon Hawkins.

It was a relief to Uncle Ben, Ham, Snag, Buck and everybody else — particularly Gumbo — to learn from Simeon Hawkins's letter to

Mr. Fentress that no more alligators were lying around loose in Charles City county.

But if those enterprising Richmond youngsters had not come across the lady dragon's nest there's no telling what increase the alligator population of the commonwealth might have undergone. The "widow," you remember, had laid more than two dozen eggs and those eggs — but no, that comes in the next chapter. For the present let us content ourselves with seeing what an eminent scientist, Dr. Hugh M. Smith, wrote in 1891 concerning the great reptiles. In the U. S. Fish Bulletin, No. XI, he says:

"The maternal alligator in April or May seeks a sheltered spot on a bank and there builds a small mound. The foundation of the mound is of mud and grass, and on this she lays some eggs. She covers the eggs with another stratum of grass and mud upon which she deposits some more eggs. Thus she proceeds until she has laid from 100 to 200 eggs. The eggs in the course of time are hatched by the sun, assisted by the heat which the decomposition of the vegetable material generates. As soon as they

have 'chipped the shell' the baby alligators are led to the water by the mother who provides them with food which she disgorges, showing much anxiety for their safety. At this early period of their existence they are exposed to many dangers, being a favorite prey of turtles and fishes."

Another authority tells us that the laying season may be in any month from January until September, but that most of the eggs are laid in June. However many eggs the lady 'gator may lay the greatest number found in any one nest thus far has been forty-eight. The period of incubation is eight weeks—that is, it takes eight weeks for the eggs to hatch.

Now here's something you may believe or not, as you please, but it is stated by one who may be trusted. The young alligators whine like puppies and follow their mothers into the water like chicks. Albert M. Reese, Syracuse University, in an article written for the Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Vol. XLVIII, Washington, 1907, informs us that the young, when about to hatch, make a curious, squeaking sound

in the shell, probably to attract the mother.

It is possible that that is the reason the lady dragon of Charles City came bulging out of the water when Snag Perkins scraped two of her eggs together. Who knows? Maybe the affectionate widow got the idea that one of her babes had just seen the light and needed help in getting out of the nest.

Still another writer, Eugene Murray-Aaron, tells about attracting a mother alligator by rubbing two eggs together. In this case the eggs came from a deserted nest which had survived a whole season. These eggs were "over ripe" but they got exactly the same results that Snag did.

How old was the lady dragon of Dancing Point when she "got hers" in the spine? That is a nice question. Possibly she was not thirty at the time she met her death. People used to think that alligators grow very slowly and that about fifteen years is necessary for them to reach a length of two feet, while a twelve-foot specimen was supposed to be a patriarch over threescore and ten.

The lady dragon of Dancing Point evidently had fed well and waxed fat. She certainly got a neat slice out of the dog Nigger. Her family name, according to scientists, was Mrs. Alligator Mississipiensis, though, as has been explained, she came from Florida. Doubtless she had relatives in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, but we'll not go into that. Alligators are not as particular about their family trees as the people of Charles City and other parts of Virginia.

The "old cow that bellowed in the mud" and incidentally gave the boys a scare was in reality the "lady dragon." Many persons have testified to the fact that alligators do bellow, or at least make thunderous noises at certain seasons. Nobody is fully prepared to say just why the Charles City monster took it into her head to "vex the drowsy ear of night." While this is not a love story, we venture the surmise she was mourning her lost mate who perished just after he had eaten to the full of dog.

Alligators, by the way, are dreadfully afraid of human beings.

CHAPTER XXVII

WE MEET OLD FRIENDS AT A CIRCUS

If by any chance you had happened to walk down the alleys of a certain section of Richmond on September 12, 1880, your attention undoubtedly would have been attracted by the number of small boys that popped in and out of back gates from time to time.

It is probable, too, that you would have observed a good deal of excitement among these small boys, and that your senses would have told you something unusual was about to take place. A closer inspection of gates, fences and stable doors would have explained the situation, or at least have helped to enlighten you as to the unrest, for the woodwork in many places was placarded with crudely printed signs. These posters, scrawled with colored pencils, showed this advertisement:

Today at 3 P. M.

GREATEST CIRCUS ON EARTH

Admishun 10 Sents Only——Gals Free

Willingham and Perkins

(Sometimes Called Ham and Snag by Them As
Knows Them)

offers a Marvelous Exhibition of
THE WORLD'S WONDERS

in the Stable Loft of Mr. Henry Clay Perkins,
the retail grocer

C-O-M-E A-N-D S-E-E

The Three-Legged Dog

The Game Rooster That Ain't Never Been Licked

The Foot of a Bear Preserved in Alkerhol

Skin of The Famus Charles City Lady Dragon

The Teeth and Eggs of An Orful Monster

and

The Blood-Kurdlin Ackt

where Messrs. Willingham and Perkins, without
weepons or other means of defeanse, enter

a corn bin containin nine live

M-A-N E-A-T-I-N A-L-L-I-G-A-T-O-R-S

Needless to say that every boy in the neighborhood who could raise ten cents by begging, by promises of future good behavior, or by selling old rags, bones and discarded metalware to the junk shops, attended the circus. As we ourselves, alas, are hard up for cash these days, it will not be our privilege to join the youngsters in the stable loft of Mr. Henry Clay Perkins, father of our enterprising little friend, Jefferson Davis Perkins.

But most of us, fortunately, have already seen a majority of the features offered by the showmen. We recognize Nigger and Billy Mahone and the skin of the Lady Dragon, while we likewise suspect that we are more or less familiar with the teeth and eggs of the "orful monster."

As for the "bear's foot preserved in alkerhol," we confess that puzzles us a bit. Can it be that Snag—it was his "idea" of course—forgot one of the ten commandments and called a dog's paw a bear's foot? We fear so. Such things are sometimes done in advertising.

Like Mrs. Willingham and Mrs. Perkins, we

also should be inclined to "weep and wring our hands in terror" on seeing Ham and Snag enter a "den" with "nine live, man-eatin' alligators," did we not have inside information as to the size of the reptiles. Happily they were but eight inches long and weighed only one and three-quarters ounces each.

These awesome saurians were the babes of the Lady Dragon of Dancing Point. After the death of their mother, they were hatched out in a box of sand under the supervision of the two showmen who exhibited them. For some weeks after the circus they survived, being fed with cockroaches and Juneybugs served from the point of a darning needle, but death finally came to relieve the helpless orphans. During the "blood kurdlin' ackt" so skillfully advertised they made no attempt to devour the showmen.

Of course Ham and Snag made big money off the circus. Who would have missed it? But after all, "money was no object" with them. What they wanted was glory. Those were flush times. The recovery of the missing bonds had restored the fortunes of the Willinghams and

put Uncle Ben on Easy Street for the rest of his life. The rebel veteran is now very, very old but altogether happy. As might be expected he still has a wooden leg and chews tobacco.

Gideon Morganfield, the "bad egg" of this story, was never brought to justice; he perished in a railroad accident three years after the events we have related. Nor were any of the other "resurrectionists" convicted, though they certainly deserved some punishment. At that time, however, there were few other ways of procuring bodies for purposes of dissection, so the grave-robbing industry to some extent was necessary. The public probably realized this, and therefore bore easily on those who followed the hideous vocation.

It is hard to say good-bye to Ham and Snag and Buck, the great triumvirate that "raised sand" in Charles City. Many are the years that have passed since they were in at the death of the Lady Dragon of Dancing Point, but they still live and prosper. Ham is the managing editor and part owner of a big newspaper. He loves a political fight and is not afraid to write

what he thinks. Snag is the president of a successful corporation which long has profited by his "ideas." As for the Rev. Dr. William Clements Timberlake — yes, that's Buck — he's about the ablest Baptist preacher in Virginia. The women adore him. He never sits down to a Sunday dinner without having the housewife help him to the leg and breast of the chicken, and he knows what to do with them, too.

Don't ask any questions about noble old Nigger, the black dog with the snow-white soul. To Ham and Snag and Buck he is one of the sweetest memories of the long ago, and it is comforting to know that he lived happily for years after his experiences with the alligator. Furthermore his license tax was always religiously paid after the year 1880. Somewhere in a certain garret in Richmond, Nigger's paw still reposes in a jar of alcohol, and near it, all covered with dust, is the battered hide of the lady dragon. Time has reconciled these two ghastly souvenirs to each other.

Billy Mahone, the silver duckwing, was never

whipped until he met the conqueror of all living things — Death. Four hundred and sixty-two of his descendants — dozens of them gallant birds like their knightly great-great-great-grandpa — still survive. So even now it will not be difficult to arrange a good cockfight in Virginia. It would be a crime, however, to let the roosters “knock” without having as their witnesses Mr. Hamilton Bacon Willingham, Mr. Jefferson Davis Perkins and — we whisper this — the Rev. William Clements Timberlake.

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